

**THE MAMMOTH BOOK OF**

# **SHORT HORROR NOVELS**

**Edited by Mike Ashley**

**COMPLETE AND UNABRIDGED**

**10 short novels by**

**Stephen King**

**Lucius Shepard**

**Russell Kirk**

**T.E.D. Klein**

**David Case**

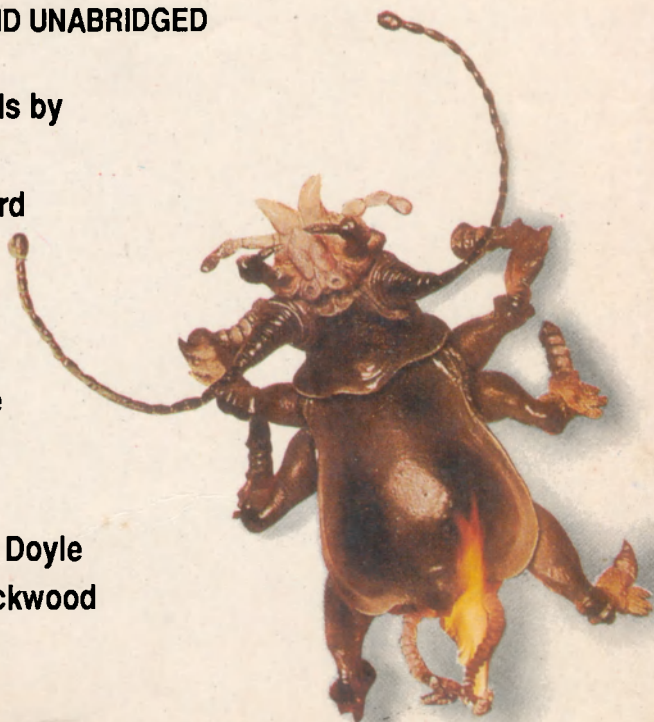
**John Metcalfe**

**Oliver Onions**

**A.C. Benson**

**Arthur Conan Doyle**

**Algernon Blackwood**



ike Ashley is a leading authority on horror, fantasy and science fiction. Since 1974 he has written and edited numerous books, including *Weird Legacies*, *Souls in Metal*, *Mrs Gaskell's Tales of Mystery and Horror*, *Jewels of Wonder*, *Best of British SF* (2 vols.), *Fantasy Readers' Guide to Ramsey Campbell*, *Who's Who in Horror and Fantasy Fiction*, and *The Complete Index to Astounding/Analog*. He is currently writing a biography of Algernon Blackwood.

He has also contributed widely to fantasy magazines and encyclopedias in Britain and America, including *Dark Horizons*, *Locus* and *Twilight Zone Magazine*.

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**Short HORROR Novels**





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Edited by Mike Ashley



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# INTRODUCTION

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by Mike Ashley

When compiling this anthology I had three thoughts in my mind. The first was to include some of the best horror fiction ever printed: the second was to resurrect at least some authors who have been neglected; and the third was to introduce some stories that have been unjustly forgotten. By luck, or perhaps by some demonic design, the three came together.

The short horror novel is an artform in itself, but it is seldom reprinted. Novellas are usually too long for the normal anthologies and too short for separate book publication.

The short horror novel, by its very length, lends itself to the optimum development necessary to complete the story. In a short story an author has little room in which to create believable characters and settings. Whilst this can be achieved to a degree, the short story essentially revolves around a single idea. The length of the novel, on the other hand, provides sufficient room for the author to develop characters and breathe life into them and their circumstances. But a novel cannot survive on a single idea, it needs a whole panoply of invention to sustain it. As a result, some novels tend to be falsely inflated, almost bloated, to achieve length rather than purpose. In the novella, on the other hand, there is room enough to develop a range of ideas and characters without letting them grow stale or overstay their welcome. They allow the reader to immerse him or herself in the story without the unwanted deflation of the sudden ending.

In selecting the authors whom I felt best represented the horror novella it turns out—by a fluke—that five are English and all dead, and five are American and all living. One of the Americans spends most of his time living in England, and one of the Brits spent most of his time living in America. They are all masters of sophisticated

horror and several have not been given the attention they deserve. I won't go into who they are here because the contents page tells you that and I have provided some biographical information before each story.

In the realms of supernatural fiction I have a special fondness for the ghost story, and a good ghost story is not easy to write. There is little difficulty in writing a scene where someone is hacked to pieces by an axe or eaten alive by maggots, because the very thought brings about revulsion and horror in the reader. But it is extremely difficult to create a subtle atmosphere of unease and bring into it elements of the supernatural which make you grip the book more tightly, as your knuckles whiten and your eyes glance furtively above the page to that half-opened door and the shadows beyond. And only a master can bring a satisfactory conclusion that leaves you thrilled, perhaps a little shaken, but in no way repulsed.

All of these ten writers can do it and have done it time and again. I hope you enjoy the sensations they create.

Mike Ashley,  
Walderslade,  
March 1988.

# STEPHEN KING

---

## The Monkey

*Do I really need to say anything about Stephen King? If you've reached this far in the anthology the chances are you're already acquainted with at least one, and probably most of King's magnum opera. But I suppose it's just possible that you don't know that he was born in Portland, Maine in 1946, that he sold his first story 'The Glass Floor' in 1967, appeared with his first novel Carrie in 1974 and has been a writing and publishing phenomenon ever since. My own personal favourite of King's novels is The Dead Zone (1979), though overall I think I most enjoyed his collaboration with Peter Straub, The Talisman (1984). But having said that I'm well aware that it's becoming increasingly difficult to keep up with King's output. 'The Monkey' (1980) may be one you missed.*

When Hal Shelburn saw it, when his son Dennis pulled it out of a mouldering Ralston-Purina carton that had been pushed far back under one attic eave, such a feeling of horror and dismay rose in him that for one moment he thought he surely must scream. He put one fist to his mouth, as if to cram it back...and then merely coughed into his fist. Neither Terry nor Dennis noticed, but Petey looked around, momentarily curious.

"Hey, neat," Dennis said respectfully. It was a tone Hal rarely got from the boy anymore himself. Dennis was twelve.

"What is it?" Petey asked. He glanced at his father again before his eyes were dragged back to the thing his big brother had found. "What is it, Daddy?"

"It's a monkey, fartbrains," Dennis said. "Haven't you ever seen a monkey before?"

"Don't call your brother fartbrains," Terry said automatically, and began to examine a box of curtains. The curtains were slimy with mildew and she dropped them quickly. "Uck."

"Can I have it, Daddy?" Petey asked. He was nine.

"What do you mean?" Dennis cried. "I found it!"

"Boys, please," Terry said. "I'm getting a headache."

Hal barely heard them—any of them. The monkey glimmered up at him from his older son's hands, grinning its old familiar grin. The same grin that had haunted his nightmares as a child, haunted them until he had—

Outside a cold gust of wind rose, and for a moment lips with no flesh blew a long note through the old, rusty gutter outside. Petey stepped closer to his father, eyes moving uneasily to the rough attic roof through which nailheads poked.

"What was that, Daddy?" he asked as the whistle died to a guttural buzz.

"Just the wind," Hal said, still looking at the monkey. Its cymbals, crescents of brass rather than full circles in the weak light of the one naked bulb, were moveless, perhaps a foot apart, and he added automatically, "Wind can whistle, but it can't carry a tune." Then he realized that was a saying of his Uncle Will's, and a goose ran over his grave.

The long note came again, the wind coming off Crystal Lake in a long, droning swoop and then wavering in the gutter. Half a dozen small drafts puffed cold October air into Hal's face—God, this place was so much like the back closet of the house in Hartford that they might all have been transported thirty years back in time.

*I won't think about that.*

But the thought wouldn't be denied.



*In the back closet where I found that goddammed monkey in that same box.*

Terry had moved away to examine a wooden crate filled with knick-knacks, duck-walking because the pitch of the eave was so sharp.

"I don't like it," Petey said, and felt for Hal's hand. "Dennis c'n have it if he wants. Can we go, Daddy?"

"Worried about ghosts, chickenguts?" Dennis inquired.

"Dennis, you stop it," Terry said absently. She picked up a wafer-thin cup with a Chinese pattern. "This is nice. This--"

Hal saw that Dennis had found the wind-up key in the monkey's back. Terror flew through him on dark wings.

"Don't do that!"

It came out more sharply than he had intended, and he had snatched the monkey out of Dennis's hands before he was really aware he had done it. Dennis looked around at him, startled. Terry had also glanced back over her shoulder, and Petey looked up. For a moment they were all silent, and the wind whistled again, very low this time, like an unpleasant invitation.

"I mean, it's probably broken," Hal said.

*It used to be broken . . . except when it wanted to be fixed.*

"Well you didn't have to grab," Dennis said.

"Dennis, shut up."

Dennis blinked at him and for a moment looked almost uneasy. Hal hadn't spoken to him so sharply in a long time. Not since he had lost his job with National Aerodyne in California two years before and they had moved to Texas. Dennis decided not to push it . . . for now. He turned back to the Ralston-Purina carton and began to root through it again, but the other stuff was nothing but shit. Broken toys bleeding springs and stuffings.

The wind was louder now, hooting instead of whistling. The attic began to creak softly, making a noise like footsteps.

"Please, Daddy?" Petey asked, only loud enough for his father to hear.

"Yeah," he said. "Terry, let's go."

"I'm not through with this--"

"I said let's go."

It was her turn to look startled.

They had taken two adjoining rooms in a motel. By ten that night the boys were asleep in their room and Terry was asleep in the adults' room. She had taken two Valium on the ride back from the home place in Casco. To keep her nerves from giving her a migraine. Just lately she took a lot of Valium. It had started around the time National

Aerodyne had laid Hal off. For the last two years he had been working for Texas Instruments—it was \$4,000 less a year, but it was work. He told Terry they were lucky. She agreed. There were plenty of software architects drawing unemployment, he said. She agreed. The company housing in Arnette was every bit as good as the place in Fresno, he said. She agreed, but he thought her agreement was a lie.

And he had been losing Dennis. He could feel the kid going, achieving a premature escape velocity, so long, Dennis, bye-bye stranger, it was nice sharing this train with you. Terry said she thought the boy was smoking reefer. She smelled it sometimes. You have to talk to him, Hal. And *he* agreed, but so far he had not.

The boys were asleep. Terry was asleep. Hal went into the bathroom and locked the door and sat down on the closed lid of the john and looked at the monkey.

He hated the way it felt, that soft brown nappy fur, worn bald in spots. He hated its grin—*that monkey grins just like a nigger*, Uncle Will had said once, but it didn't grin like a nigger, or like anything human. Its grin was all teeth, and if you wound up the key, the lips would move, the teeth would seem to get bigger, to become vampire teeth, the lips would writhe and the cymbals would bang, stupid monkey, stupid clockwork monkey, stupid, stupid—

He dropped it. His hands were shaking and he dropped it.

The key clicked on the bathroom tile as it struck the floor. The sound seemed very loud in the stillness. It grinned at him with its murky amber eyes, doll's eyes, filled with idiot glee, its brass cymbals poised as if to strike up a march for some black band from hell, and on the bottom the words MADE IN HONG KONG were stamped.

"You can't be here," he whispered. "I threw you down the well when I was nine."

The monkey grinned up at him.

Hal Shelburn shuddered.

Outside in the night, a black capful of wind shook the motel.

Hal's brother Bill and Bill's wife Collette met them at Uncle Will's and Aunt Ida's the next day. "Did it ever cross your mind that a death in the family is a really lousy way to renew the family connection?" Bill asked him with a bit of a grin. He had been named for Uncle Will. Will and Bill, champions of the rodayo, Uncle Will used to say, and ruffle Bill's hair. It was one of his sayings . . . like the wind can whistle but it can't carry a tune. Uncle Will had died six years before, and Aunt Ida had lived on here alone, until a stroke had taken her just the previous week. Very sudden, Bill had said when

he called long distance to give Hal the news. As if he could know; as if anyone could know. She had died alone.

"Yeah," Hal said. "The thought crossed my mind."

They looked at the place together, the home place where they had finished growing up. Their father, a merchant mariner, had simply disappeared as if from the very face of the earth when they were young; Bill claimed to remember him vaguely, but Hal had no memories of him at all. Their mother had died when Bill was ten and Hal eight. They had come to Uncle Will's and Aunt Ida's from Hartford, and they had been raised here, and gone to college here. Bill had stayed and now had a healthy law practice in Portland.

Hal saw that Petey had wandered off toward the blackberry tangles that lay on the eastern side of the house in a mad jumble. "Stay away from there, Petey," he called.

Petey looked back, questioning. Hal felt simple love for the boy rush him . . . and he suddenly thought of the monkey again.

"Why, Dad?"

"The old well's in there someplace," Bill said. "But I'll be damned if I remember just where. Your dad's right, Petey—those blackberry tangles are a good place to stay away from. Thorns'll do a job on you. Right, Hal?"

"Right," Hal said automatically. Pete moved away, not looking back, and then started down the embankment toward the small shingle of beach where Dennis was skipping stones over the water. Hal felt something in his chest loosen a little.

Bill might have forgotten where the old well had been, but late that afternoon Hal went to it unerringly, shouldering his way through the brambles that tore at his old flannel jacket and hunted for his eyes. He reached it and stood there, breathing hard, looking at the rotted, warped boards that covered it. After a moment's debate, he knelt (his knees fired twin pistol shots) and moved two of the boards aside.

From the bottom of that wet, rock-lined throat a face stared up at him, wide eyes, grimacing mouth, and a moan escaped him. It was not loud, except in his heart. There it had been very loud.

It was his own face, reflected up from dark water.

Not the monkey's. For a moment he had thought it was the monkey's.

He was shaking. Shaking all over.

*I threw it down the well. I threw it down the well, please God don't let me be crazy. I threw it down the well.*

The well had gone dry the summer Johnny McCabe died, the year

after Bill and Hal came to stay at the home place with Uncle Will and Aunt Ida. Uncle Will had borrowed money from the bank to have an artesian well sunk, and the blackberry tangles had grown up around the old dug well. The dry well.

Except the water had come back. Like the monkey.

This time the memory would not be denied. Hal sat there helplessly, letting it come, trying to do with it, to ride it like a surfer riding a monster wave that will crush him if he falls off his board, just trying to get through it so it would be gone again.

He had crept out here with the monkey late that summer, and the blackberries had been out, the smell of them thick and cloying. No one came in here to pick, although Aunt Ida would sometimes stand at the edge of the tangles and pick a cupful of berries into her apron. In here the blackberries had gone past ripe to overripe, some of them were rotting, sweating a thick white fluid like pus, and the crickets sang maddeningly in the high grass underfoot, their endless cry: *Reeeeeeee-*

The thorns tore at him, brought dots of blood onto his bare arms. He made no effort to avoid their sting. He had been blind with terror—so blind he had come within inches of stumbling onto the boards that covered the well, perhaps within inches of crashing thirty feet to the well's muddy bottom. He had pinwheeled his arms for balance, and more thorns had branded his forearms. It was that memory that had caused him to call Petey back sharply.

That was the day Johnny McCabe had died—his best friend. Johnny had been climbing the rungs up to his treehouse in his back yard. The two of them had spent many hours up there that summer, playing pirate, seeing make-believe galleons out on the lake, unlimbering the cannons, preparing to board. Johnny had been climbing up to the treehouse as he had done a thousand times before, and the rung just below the trap door in the bottom of the treehouse had snapped off in his hands and Johnny had fallen thirty feet to the ground and had broken his neck and it was the monkey's fault, the monkey, the goddam hateful monkey. When the phone rang, when Aunt Ida's mouth dropped open and then formed an O of horror as her friend Milly from down the road told her the news, when Aunt Ida said, "Come out on the porch, Hal, I have to tell you some bad news—," he had thought with sick horror, *The monkey! What's the monkey done now?*

There had been no reflection of his face trapped at the bottom of the well that day, only the stone cobbles going down into the darkness and the smell of wet mud. He had looked at the monkey lying there

on the wiry grass that grew between the blackberry tangles, its cymbals poised, its grinning teeth huge between its splayed lips, its fur, rubbed away in balding, mangy patches here and there, its glazed eyes.

"I hate you," he had hissed at it. He wrapped his hand around its loathsome body, feeling the nappy fur crinkle. It grinned at him as he held it up in front of his face. "Go on!" he dared it, beginning to cry for the first time that day. He shook it. The poised cymbals trembled minutely. It spoiled everything good. Everything. "Go on, clap them! Clap them!"

The monkey only grinned.

"Go on and clap them!" His voice rose hysterically. "Fraidy-cat, fraidy-cat, go on and clap them! I dare you!"

Its brownish-yellow eyes. Its huge and gleeful teeth.

He threw it down the well then, mad with grief and terror. He saw it turn over once on its way down, a simian acrobat doing a trick, and the sun glinted one last time on those cymbals. It struck the bottom with a thud, and that must have jogged its clockwork, for suddenly the cymbals *did* begin to beat. Their steady, deliberate, and tinny banging rose to his ears, echoing and fey in the stone throat of the dead well: *jang-jang-jang-jang-*

Hal clapped his hands over his mouth, and for a moment he could see it down there, perhaps only in the eye of imagination . . . lying there in the mud, eyes glaring up at the small circle of his boy's face peering over the lip of the well (as if marking its shape forever), lips expanding and contracting around those grinning teeth, cymbals clapping, funny wind-up monkey.

*Jang-jang-jang-jang*, who's dead? *Jang-jang-jang-jang*, is it Johnny McCabe, falling with his eyes wide, doing his own acrobatic somersault as he falls through the bright summer vacation air with the splintered rung still held in his hands to strike the ground with a single bitter snapping sound? Is it Johnny, Hal? Or is it you?

Moaning, Hal had shoved the boards across the hole, getting splinters in his hands, not caring, not even aware of them until later. And still he could hear it, even through the boards, muffled now and somehow all the worse for that: it was down there in stone-faced dark, clapping its cymbals and jerking its repulsive body, the sounding coming up like the sound of a prematurely buried man scrabbling for a way out.

*Jang-jang-jang-jang*, who's dead this time?

He fought and battered his way back through the blackberry creepers. Thorns stitched fresh lines of welling blood briskly across his face and burdocks caught in the cuffs of his jeans, and he fell full-length once, his ears still jangling, as if it had followed him. Uncle

Will found him later, sitting on an old tire in the garage and sobbing, and he had thought Hal was crying for his dead friend. So he had been; but he had also cried in the aftermath of terror.

He had thrown the monkey down the well in the afternoon. That evening, as twilight crept in through a shimmering mantle of ground-fog, a car moving too fast for the reduced visibility had run down Aunt Ida's manx cat in the road and gone right on. There had been guts everywhere, Bill had thrown up, but Hal had only turned his face away, his pale, still face, hearing Aunt Ida's sobbing (this on top of the news about the McCabe boy had caused a fit of weeping that was almost hysterics, and it was almost two hours before Uncle Will could calm her completely) as if from miles away. In his heart there was a cold and exultant joy. It hadn't been his turn. It had been Aunt Ida's manx, not him, not his brother Bill or his Uncle Will (just two champions of the rodayo). And now the monkey was gone, it was down the well, and one scruffy manx cat with ear mites was not too great a price to pay. If the monkey wanted to clap its hellish cymbals now, let it. It could clap and clash them for the crawling bugs and beetles, the dark things that made their home in the well's stone gullet. It would rot down there in the darkness and its loathsome cogs and wheels and springs would rust in darkness. It would die down there. In the mud and the darkness. Spiders would spin it a shroud.

But . . . it had come back.

Slowly, Hal covered the well again, as he had on that day, and in his ears he heard the phantom echo of the monkey's cymbals: *Jang-jang-jang, who's dead, Hal? Is it Terry? Dennis? Is it Petey, Hal? He's your favorite, isn't he? Is it him? Jang-jang-jang-*

"Put that down!"

Petey flinched and dropped the monkey, and for one nightmare moment Hal thought that would do it, that the jolt would jog its machinery and the cymbals would begin to beat and clash.

"Daddy, you scared me."

"I'm sorry. I just . . . I don't want you to play with that."

The others had gone to see a movie, and he had thought he would beat them back to the motel. But he had stayed at the home place longer than he would have guessed; the old, hateful memories seemed to move in their own eternal time zone.

Terry was sitting near Dennis, watching "The Beverly Hillbillies." She watched the old, grainy print with a steady, bemused concentration that spoke of a recent Valium pop. Dennis was reading a rock magazine with the group Styx on the cover. Petey had been sitting

cross-legged on the carpet, goofing with the monkey.

"It doesn't work anyway," Petey said. *Which explains why Dennis let him have it*, Hal thought, and then felt ashamed and angry at himself. He seemed to have no control over the hostility he felt toward Dennis more and more often, but in the aftermath he felt demeaned and tacky...helpless.

"No," he said. "It's old. I'm going to throw it away. Give it to me."

He held out his hand and Petey, looking troubled, handed it over.

Dennis said to his mother, "Pop's turning into a friggin schizophrenic."

Hal was across the room even before he knew he was going, the monkey in one hand, grinning as if in approbation. He hauled Dennis out of his chair by the shirt. There was a purring sound as a seam came adrift somewhere. Dennis looked almost comically shocked. His copy of *Tiger Beat* fell to the floor.

"Hey!"

"You come with me," Hal said grimly, pulling his son toward the door to the connecting room.

"Hal!" Terry nearly screamed. Petey just goggled.

Hal pulled Dennis through. He slammed the door and then slammed Dennis against the door. Dennis was starting to look scared. "You're getting a mouth problem," Hal said.

"Let go of me! You tore my shirt, you—"

Hal slammed the boy against the door again. "Yes," he said. "A real mouth problem. Did you learn that in school? Or back in the smoking area?"

Dennis flushed, his face momentarily ugly with guilt. "I wouldn't be in that shitty school if you didn't get canned!" he burst out.

Hal slammed Dennis against the door again. "I didn't get canned, I got laid off, you know it, and I don't need any of your shit about it. You have problems? Welcome to the world, Dennis. Just don't you lay off all your problems on me. You're eating. Your ass is covered. At eleven, I don't...need any...shit from you." He punctuated each phrase by pulling the boy forward until their noses were almost touching and then slamming him back into the door. It was not hard enough to hurt, but Dennis was scared—his father had not laid a hand on him since they moved to Texas—and now he began to cry with a young boy's loud, braying, healthy sobs.

"Go ahead, beat me up!" he yelled at Hal, his face twisted and blotchy. "Beat me up if you want, I know how much you fucking hate me!"

"I don't hate you. I love you a lot, Dennis. But I'm your dad and you're going to show me respect or I'm going to bust you for it."

Dennis tried to pull away. Hal pulled the boy to him and hugged him. Dennis fought for a moment and then put his face against Hal's chest and wept as if exhausted. It was the sort of cry Hal hadn't heard from either of his children in years. He closed his eyes, realizing that he felt exhausted himself.

Terry began to hammer on the other side of the door. "Stop it, Hal! Whatever you're doing to him, stop it!"

"I'm not killing him," Hal said. "Go away, Terry."

"Don't you—"

"It's all right, Mom," Dennis said, muffled against Hal's chest.

He could feel her perplexed silence for a moment, and then she went. Hal looked at his son again.

"I'm sorry I badmouthed you, Dad," Dennis said reluctantly.

"When we get home next week, I'm going to wait two or three days and then I'm going to go through all your drawers, Dennis. If there's something in them you don't want me to see, you better get rid of it."

That flash of guilt again. Dennis lowered his eyes and wiped away snot with the back of his hand.

"Can I go now?" He sounded sullen once more.

"Sure," Hal said, and let him go. *Got to take him camping in the spring, just the two of us. Do some fishing, like Uncle Will used to do with Bill and me. Got to get close to him. Got to try.*

He sat down on the bed in the empty room and looked at the monkey. *You'll never be close to him again, Hal, its grin seemed to say. Never again. Never again.*

Just looking at the monkey made him feel tired. He laid it aside and put a hand over his eyes.

That night Hal stood in the bathroom, brushing his teeth, and thought: *It was in the same box. How could it be in the same box?*

The toothbrush jabbed upward, hurting his gums. He winced.

He had been four, Bill six, the first time he saw the monkey. Their missing father had bought a house in Hartford, and it had been theirs, free and clear, before he died or disappeared or whatever it had been. Their mother worked as a secretary at Holmes Aircraft, the helicopter plant out in Westville, and a series of sitters came in to stay with the boys, except by then it was just Hal that the sitters had to mind through the day—Bill was in first grade, big school. None of the babysitters stayed for long. They got pregnant and married their boyfriends or got work at Holmes, or Mrs. Shelburn would discover they had been at the cooking sherry or her bottle of brandy which was kept in the sideboard for special occasions. Most of them were



stupid girls who seemed only to want to eat or sleep. None of them wanted to read to Hal as his mother would do.

The sitter that long winter was a huge, sleek black girl named Beulah. She fawned over Hal when Hal's mother was around and sometimes pinched him when she wasn't. Still, Hal had some liking for Beulah, who once in awhile would read him a lurid tale from one of her confession or true-detective magazines ("Death Came for the Voluptuous Redhead," Beulah would intone ominously in the dozey silence of the living room, and pop another Reese's Peanut Butter Cup into her mouth while Hal solemnly studied the grainy tabloid pictures and drank his milk from his Wish-Cup). And the liking made what happened worse.

He found the monkey on a cold, cloudy day in March. Sleet ticked sporadically off the windows, and Beulah was asleep on the couch, a copy of *My Story* tented open on her admirable bosom.

So Hal went into the back closet to look at his father's things.

The back closet was a storage space that ran the length of the second floor on the left side, extra space that had never been finished off. One got into the back closet by using a small door—a down-the-rabbit-hole sort of door—on Bill's side of the boys' bedroom. They both liked to go in there, even though it was chilly in winter and hot enough in summer to wring a bucketful of sweat out of your pores. Long and narrow and somehow snug, the back closet was full of fascinating junk. No matter how much stuff you looked at, you never seemed to be able to look at it all. He and Bill had spent whole Saturday afternoons up here, barely speaking to each other, taking things out of boxes, examining them, turning them over and over so their hands could absorb each unique reality, putting them back. Now Hal wondered if he and Bill hadn't been trying, as best they could, to somehow make contact with their vanished father.

He had been a merchant mariner with a navigator's certificate, and there were stacks of charts back there, some marked with neat circles (and the dimple of the compass' swing-point in the center of each). There were twenty volumes of something called *Barron's Guide to Navigation*. A set of cockeyed binoculars that made your eyes feel hot and funny if you looked through them too long. There were touristy things from a dozen ports of call—rubber hula-hula dolls, a black cardboard bowler with a torn band that said YOU PICK A GIRL AND I'LL PICCADILLY, a glass globe with a tiny Eiffel Tower inside—and there were also envelopes with foreign stamps tucked carefully away inside, and foreign coins; there were rock samples from the Hawaiian island of Maui, a glassy Black-heavy and somehow ominous, and funny records in foreign languages.

That day, with the sleet ticking hypnotically off the roof just above his head, Hal worked his way all the way down to the far end of the back closet, moved a box aside, and saw another box behind it—a Ralston-Purina box. Looking over the top was a pair of glassy hazel eyes. They gave him a start and he skittered back for a moment, heart thumping, as if he had discovered a deadly pygmy. Then he saw its silence, the glaze in those eyes, and realized it was some sort of toy. He moved forward again and lifted it carefully from the box.

It grinned its ageless, toothy grin in the yellow light, its cymbals held apart.

Delighted, Hal had turned it this way and that, feeling the crinkle of its nappy fur. Its funny grin pleased him. Yet hadn't there been something else? An almost instinctive feeling of disgust that had come and gone almost before he was aware of it? Perhaps it was so, but with an old, old memory like this one, you had to be careful not to believe too much. Old memories could lie. But . . . hadn't he seen that same expression on Petey's face, in the attic of the home place?

He had seen the key set into the small of its back, and turned it. It had turned far too easily; there were no winding-up clicks. Broken, then. Broken, but still neat.

He took it out to play with it.

"Whatchoo got, Hal?" Beulah asked, waking from her nap.

"Nothing," Hal said. "I found it."

He put it up on the shelf on his side of the bedroom. It stood atop his Lassie coloring books, grinning, staring into space, cymbals poised. It was broken, but it grinned nonetheless. That night Hal awakened from some uneasy dream, bladder full, and got up to use the bathroom in the hall. Bill was a breathing lump of covers across the room.

Hal came back, almost asleep again . . . and suddenly the monkey began to beat its cymbals together in the darkness.

*Jang-jang-jang-jang-*

He came fully awake, as if snapped in the face with a cold, wet towel. His heart gave a staggering leap of surprise, and a tiny, mouselike squeak escaped his throat. He stared at the monkey, eyes wide, lips trembling.

*Jang-jang-jang-jang-*

Its body rocked and humped on the shelf. Its lips spread and closed, spread and closed, hideously gleeful, revealing huge and carnivorous teeth.

"Stop," Hal whispered.

His brother turned over and uttered a loud, single snore. All else was silent . . . except for the monkey. The cymbals clapped and clashed, and surely it would wake his brother, his mother, the world.

It would wake the dead.

*Jang-jang-jang-jang-*

Hal moved toward it, meaning to stop it somehow, perhaps put his hand between its cymbals until it ran down (*but it was broken, wasn't it?*), and then it stopped on its own. The cymbals came together one last time—*Jang!*—and then spread slowly apart to their original position. The brass glimmered in the shadows. The monkey's dirty yellowish teeth grinned their improbable grin.

The house was silent again. His mother turned over in her bed and echoed Bill's single snore. Hal got back into his bed and pulled the covers up, his heart still beating fast, and he thought: *I'll put it back in the closet again tomorrow. I don't want it.*

But the next morning he forgot all about putting the monkey back because his mother didn't go to work. Beulah was dead. Their mother wouldn't tell them exactly what happened. "It was an accident, just a terrible accident" was all she would say. But that afternoon Bill bought a newspaper on his way home from school and smuggled page four up to their room under his shirt (TWO KILLED IN APARTMENT SHOOT-OUT, the headline read) and read the article haltingly to Hal, following along with his finger, while their mother cooked supper in the kitchen. Beulah McCaffery, 19, and Sally Tremont, 20, had been shot by Miss McCaffery's boyfriend, Leonard White, 25, following an argument over who was to go out and pick up an order of Chinese food. Miss Tremont had expired at Hartford Receiving; Beulah McCaffery had been pronounced dead at the scene.

It was like Beulah just disappeared into one of her own detective magazines, Hal Shelburn thought, and felt a cold chill race up his spine and then circle his heart. And then he realized the shootings had occurred about the same time the monkey—

"Hal?" It was Terry's voice, sleepy. "Coming to bed?"

He spat toothpaste into the sink and rinsed his mouth. "Yes," he said.

He had put the monkey in his suitcase earlier, and locked it up. They were flying back to Texas in two or three days. But before they went, he would get rid of the damned thing for good.

Somehow.

"You were pretty rough on Dennis this afternoon," Terry said in the dark.

"Dennis has needed somebody to start being rough on him for quite a while now, I think. He's been drifting. I just don't want him to start falling."

"Psychologically, beating the boy isn't a very productive—"

"I didn't *beat* him, Terry-for Christ's sake!"

"-way to assert parental authority-"

"Oh, don't give me any of that encounter-group shit," Hal said angrily.

"I can see you don't want to discuss this." Her voice was cold.

"I told him to get the dope out of the house, too."

"You did?" Now she sounded apprehensive. "How did he take it? What did he say?"

"Come on, Terry! What *could* he say? 'You're fired'?"

"Hal, what's the *matter* with you? You're not like this-what's *wrong*?"

"Nothing," he said, thinking of the monkey locked away in his Samsonite. Would he hear it if it began to clap its cymbals? Yes, he surely would. Muffled, but audible. Clapping doom for someone, as it had for Beulah, Johnny McCabe, Uncle Will's dog Daisy. *Jang-jang-jang*, is it you, Hal? "I've just been under a strain."

"I *hope* that's all it is. Because I don't like you this way."

"No?" And the words escaped before he could stop them; he didn't even want to stop them. "So pop a few Valium and everything will look okay again, right?"

He heard her draw breath in and let it out shakily. She began to cry then. He could have comforted her (maybe), but there seemed to be no comfort in him. There was too much terror. It would be better when the monkey was gone again, gone for good. Please God, gone for good.

He lay wakeful until very late, until morning began to gray the air outside. But he thought he knew what to do.

Bill had found the monkey the second time.

That was about a year and a half after Beulah McCaffery had been pronounced dead at the scene. It was summer. Hal had just finished kindergarten.

He came in from playing with Stevie Arlingen and his mother called, "Wash your hands, Hal, you're filthy like a pig." She was on the porch, drinking an iced tea and reading a book. It was her vacation; she had two weeks.

Hal gave his hands a token pass under cold water and printed dirt on the hand-towel. "Where's Bill?"

"Upstairs. You tell him to clean his side of the room. It's a mess."

Hal, who enjoyed being the messenger of unpleasant news in such matters, rushed up. Bill was sitting on the floor. The small down-the-rabbit-hole door leading to the back closet was ajar. He had the monkey in his hands.

"That don't work," Hal said immediately. "It's busted."

He was apprehensive, although he barely remembered coming back from the bathroom that night, and the monkey suddenly beginning to clap its cymbals. A week or so after that, he had had a bad dream about the monkey and Beulah—he couldn't remember exactly what—and had awakened screaming, thinking for a moment that the soft weight on his chest was the monkey, that he would open his eyes and see it grinning down at him. But of course the soft weight had only been his pillow, clutched with panicky tightness. His mother came in to soothe him with a drink of water and two chalky-orange baby aspirins, those Valium for childhood's troubled times. She thought it was the fact of Beulah's death that had caused the nightmare. So it was, but not in the way she thought.

He barely remembered any of this now, but the monkey still scared him, particularly its cymbals. And its teeth.

"I know that," Bill said, and tossed the monkey aside. "It's stupid." It landed on Bill's bed, starting up at the ceiling, cymbals poised. Hal did not like to see it there. "You want to go down to Teddy's and get Popsicles?"

"I spent my allowance already," Hal said. "Besides, Mom says you got to clean up your side of the room."

"I can do that later," Bill said. "And I'll loan you a nickel, if you want." Bill was not above giving Hal an Indian rope burn sometimes, and would occasionally trip him up or punch him for no particular reason, but mostly he was okay.

"Sure," Hal said gratefully. "I'll just put that busted monkey back in the closet first, okay?"

"Nah," Bill said, getting up. "Let's go-go-go."

Hal went. Bill's moods were changeable, and if he paused to put the monkey away, he might lose his Popsicle. They went down to Teddy's and got them, then down to the Rec where some kids were getting up a baseball game. Hal was too small to play, but he sat far out in foul territory, sucking his root beer Popsicle and chasing what the big kids called "Chinese home runs." They didn't get home until almost dark, and their mother whacked Hal for getting the hand-towel dirty and whacked Bill for not cleaning up his side of the room, and after supper there was TV, and by the time all of that had happened, Hal had forgotten all about the monkey. It somehow found its way up onto *Bill's* shelf, where it stood right next to Bill's autographed picture of Bill Boyd. And there it stayed for nearly two years.

By the time Hal was seven, babysitters had become an extravagance, and Mrs. Shelburn's last word to the two of them each morning was, "Bill, look after your brother."

That day, however, Bill had to stay after school for a Safety Patrol Boy meeting and Hal came home alone, stopping at each corner until he could see absolutely no traffic coming in either direction and then skittering across, shoulders hunched, like a doughboy crossing no man's land. He let himself into the house with the key under the mat and went immediately to the refrigerator for a glass of milk. He got the bottle, and then it slipped through his fingers and crashed to smithereens on the floor, the pieces of glass flying everywhere, as the monkey suddenly began to beat its cymbals together upstairs.

*Jang-jang-jang-jang, on and on.*

He stood there immobile, looking down at the broken glass and the puddle of milk, full of a terror he could not name or understand. It was simply there, seeming to ooze from his pores.

He turned and rushed upstairs to their room. The monkey stood on Bill's shelf, seeming to stare at him. He had knocked the autographed picture of Bill Boyd face-down onto Bill's bed. The monkey rocked and grinned and beat its cymbals together. Hal approached it slowly, not wanting to, not able to stay away. Its cymbals jerked apart and crashed together and jerked apart again. As he got closer, he could hear the clockwork running in the monkey's guts.

Abruptly, uttering a cry of revulsion and terror, he swatted it from the shelf as one might swat a large, loathsome bug. It struck Bill's pillow and then fell on the floor, cymbals still beating together, *jang-jang-jang*, lips flexing and closing as it lay there on its back in a patch of late April sunshine.

Then, suddenly, he remembered Beulah. The monkey had clapped its cymbals that night, too.

Hal kicked it with one Buster Brown shoe, kicked it as hard as he could, and this time the cry that escaped him was one of fury. The clockwork monkey skittered across the floor, bounced off the wall, and lay still. Hal stood staring at it, fists bunched, heart pounding. It grinned saucily back at him, the sun a burning pinpoint in one glass eye. *Kick me all you want*, it seemed to tell him. *I'm nothing but cogs and clockwork and a worm-gear or two, kick me all you feel like, I'm not real, just a funny clockwork monkey is all I am, and who's dead? There's been an explosion at the helicopter plant! What's that rising up into the sky like a big bloody bowling ball with eyes where the finger-holes should be? Is it your mother's head, Hal? Down at Brook Street Corner! The car was going too fast! The driver was drunk! There's one Patrol Boy less! Could you hear the crunching sound when the wheels ran over Bill's skull and his brains squirted out of his ears? Yes? No? Maybe? Don't ask me, I don't know, I can't know, all I know how to do is beat these cymbals together jang-jang-jang, and who's dead, Hal?*

*Your mother? Your brother? Or is it you, Hal? Is it you?*

He rushed at it again, meaning to stomp on it, smash its loathsome body, jump on it until cogs and gears flew and its horrible glass eyes rolled across the floor. But just as he reached it its cymbals came together once more, very softly ... (*jang*) ... as a spring somewhere inside expanded one final, minute notch ... and a sliver of ice seemed to whisper its way through the walls of his heart, impaling it, stilling its fury and leaving him sick with terror again. The monkey almost seemed to know-how gleeful its grin seemed!

He picked it up, tweezing one of its arms between the thumb and first finger of his right hand, mouth drawn down in a bow of loathing, as if it were a corpse he held. Its mangy fake fur seemed hot and fevered against his skin. He fumbled open the tiny door that led to the back closet and turned on the bulb. The monkey grinned at him as he crawled down the length of the storage area between boxes piled on top of boxes, past the set of navigation books and the photograph albums with their fume of old chemicals and the souvenirs and the old clothes, and Hal thought: *If it begins to clap its cymbals together now and move in my hand, I'll scream, and if I scream, it'll do more than grin, it'll start to laugh, at me, and then I'll go crazy and they'll find me in here, drooling and laughing, crazy, I'll be crazy, oh please dear God, please dear Jesus, don't let me go crazy-*

He reached the far end and clawed two boxes aside, spilling one of them, and jammed the monkey back into the Ralston-Purina box in the farthest corner. And it leaned in there, comfortably, as if home at last, cymbals poised, grinning its simian grin, as if the joke were still on Hal. Hal crawled backward, sweating, hot and cold, all fire and ice, waiting for the cymbals to begin, and when they began, the monkey would leap from its box and scurry beetlelike toward him, clockwork whirring, cymbals clashing madly, and-

-and none of that happened. He turned off the light and slammed the small down-the-rabbit-hole door and leaned on it, panting. At last he began to feel a little better. He went downstairs on rubbery legs, got an empty bag, and began carefully to pick up the jagged shards and splinters of the broken milk bottle, wondering if he was going to cut himself and bleed to death, if that was what the clapping cymbals had meant. But that didn't happen, either. He got a towel and wiped up the milk and then sat down to see if his mother and brother would come home.

His mother came first, asking, "Where's Bill?"

In a low, colorless voice, now sure that Bill must be dead, Hal started to explain about the Patrol Boy meeting, knowing that, even given a very long meeting, Bill should have been home half an hour

ago.

His mother looked at him curiously, started to ask what was wrong, and then the door opened and Bill came in-only it was not Bill at all, not really. This was a ghost-Bill, pale and silent.

"What's wrong?" Mrs. Shelburn exclaimed. "Bill, what's wrong?"

Bill began to cry and they got the story through his tears. There had been a car, he said. He and his friend Charlie Silverman were walking home together after the meeting and the car came around Brook Street Corner too fast and Charlie had frozen, Bill had tugged Charlie's hand once but had lost his grip and the car-

Bill began to bray out loud, hysterical sobs, and his mother hugged him to her, rocking him, and Hal looked out on the porch and saw two policemen standing there. The squad car in which they had conveyed Bill home was at the curb. Then he began to cry himself ... but his tears were tears of relief.

It was Bill's turn to have nightmares now-dreams in which Charlie Silverman died over and over again, knocked out of his Red Ryder cowboy boots, and flipped onto the hood of the old Hudson Hornet the drunk driver had been driving. Charlie Silverman's head and the Hudson's windshield had met with an explosive noise, and both had shattered. The drunk driver, who owned a candy store in Milford, suffered a heart attack shortly after being taken into custody (perhaps it was the sight of Charlie Silverman's brains drying on his pants), and his lawyer was quite successful at the trial with his "this man has been punished enough" theme. The drunk was given sixty days (suspended) and lost his privilege to operate a motor vehicle in the state of Connecticut for five years...which was about as long as Bill Shelburn's nightmares lasted. The monkey was hidden away again in the back closet. Bill never noticed it was gone from his shelf ... or if he did, he never said.

Hal felt safe for a while. He even began to forget about the monkey again, or to believe it had only been a bad dream. But when he came home from school on the afternoon his mother died, it was back on his shelf, cymbals poised, grinning down at him.

He approached it slowly as if from outside himself-as if his own body had been turned into a wind-up toy at the sight of the monkey. He saw his hand reach out and take it down. He felt the nappy fur crinkle under his hand, but the feeling was muffled, mere pressure, as if someone had shot him full of Novocaine. He could hear his breathing, quick and dry, like the rattle of wind through straw.

He turned it over and grasped the key and years later he would think that his drugged fascination was like that of a man who puts a six-shooter with one loaded chamber against a closed and jittering



eyelid and pulls the trigger.

*No don't-let it alone throw it away don't touch it-*

He turned the key and in the silence he heard a perfect tiny series of winding-up clicks. When he let the key go, the monkey began to clap its cymbals together and he could feel its body jerking, bend-and-jerk, bend-and-jerk, as if it were live, it was alive, writhing in his hand like some loathsome pygmy, and the vibration he felt through its balding brown fur was not that of turning cogs but the beating of its black and cindered heart.

With a groan, Hal dropped the monkey and backed away, fingernails digging into the flesh under his eyes, palms pressed to his mouth. He stumbled over something and nearly lost his balance (then he would have been right down on the floor with it, his bulging blue eyes looking into its glassy hazel ones). He scrambled toward the door, backed through it, slammed it, and leaned against it. Suddenly he bolted for the bathroom and vomited.

It was Mrs. Stukey from the helicopter plant who brought the news and stayed with them those first two endless nights, until Aunt Ida got down from Maine. Their mother had died of a brain embolism in the middle of the afternoon. She had been standing at the water cooler with a cup of water in one hand and had crumpled as if shot, still holding the paper cup in one hand. With the other she had clawed at the water cooler and had pulled the great glass bottle of Poland water down with her. It had shattered ... but the plant doctor, who came on the run, said later that he believed Mrs. Shelburn was dead before the water had soaked through her dress and her underclothes to wet her skin. The boys were never told any of this, but Hal knew anyway. He dreamed it again and again on the long nights following his mother's death. *You still have trouble gettin to sleep, little brother?* Bill had asked him, and Hal supposed Bill thought all the thrashing and bad dreams had to do with their mother dying so suddenly, and that was right ... but only partly right. There was the guilt: the certain, deadly knowledge that he had killed his mother by winding the monkey up on that sunny after-school afternoon.

When Hal finally fell asleep, his sleep must have been deep. When he awoke, it was nearly noon. Petey was sitting cross-legged in a chair across the room, methodically eating an orange section by section and watching a game show on TV.

Hal swung his legs out of bed, feeling as if someone had punched him down into sleep ... and then punched him back out of it. His head throbbed. "Where's your mom, Petey?"

Petey glanced around. "She and Dennis went shopping. I said I'd

stay here with you. Do you always talk in your sleep, Dad?"

Hal looked at his son cautiously. "No, I don't think so. What did I say?"

"It was all muttering, I couldn't make it out. It scared me, a little."

"Well, here I am in my right mind again," Hal said, and managed a small grin. Petey grinned back, and Hal felt simple love for the boy again, an emotion that was bright and strong and uncomplicated. He wondered why he had always been able to feel so good about Petey, to feel he understood Petey and could help him, and why Dennis seemed a window too dark to look through, a mystery in his ways and habits, the sort of boy he could not understand because he had never been that sort of boy. It was too easy to say that the move from California had changed Dennis, or that—

His thoughts froze. The monkey. The monkey was sitting on the windowsill, cymbals poised. Hal felt his heart stop dead in his chest and then suddenly begin to gallop. His vision wavered, and his throbbing head began to ache ferociously.

It had escaped from the suitcase and now stood on the windowsill, grinning at him. *Thought you got rid of me, didn't you? But you've thought that before, haven't you?*

Yes, he thought sickly. Yes, I have.

"Pete, did you take that monkey out of my suitcase?" he asked, knowing the answer already. He had locked the suitcase and had put the key in his overcoat pocket.

Petey glanced at the monkey, and something—Hal thought it was unease—passed over his face. "No," he said. "Mom put it there."

"Mom did?"

"Yeah. She took it from you. She laughed."

"Took it from me? What are you talking about?"

"You had it in bed with you. I was brushing my teeth, but Dennis saw. He laughed, too. He said you looked like a baby with a teddy bear."

Hal looked at the monkey. His mouth was too dry to swallow. He'd had it in *bed* with him? In *bed*? That loathsome fur against his cheek, maybe against his *mouth*, those glass eyes staring into his sleeping face, those grinning teeth near his neck? Dear *God*.

He turned abruptly and went to the closet. The Samsonite was there, still locked. The key was still in his overcoat pocket.

Behind him, the TV snapped off. He came out of the closet slowly. Petey was looking at him soberly. "Daddy, I don't like that monkey," he said, his voice almost too low to hear.

"Nor do I," Hal said.

Petey looked at him closely, to see if he was joking, and saw that

he was not. He came to his father and hugged him tight. Hal could feel him trembling.

Petey spoke into his ear, then, very rapidly, as if afraid he might not have courage enough to say it again ... or that the monkey might overhear.

"It's like it looks at you. Like it looks at you no matter where you are in the room. And if you go into the other room, it's like it's looking through the wall at you. I kept feeling like it ... like it wanted me for something."

Petey shuddered. Hal held him tight.

"Like it wanted you to wind it up," Hal said.

Pete nodded violently. "It isn't really broken, is it, Dad?"

"Sometimes it is," Hal said, looking over his son's shoulder at the monkey. "But sometimes it still works."

"I kept wanting to go over there and wind it up. It was so quiet, and I thought, I can't, it'll wake up Daddy, but I still wanted to, and I went over and I ... I *touch*ed it and I hate the way it feels ... but I liked it, too ... and it was like it was saying, Wind me up, Petey, we'll play, your father isn't going to wake up, he's never going to wake up at all, wind me up, wind me up...."

The boy suddenly burst into tears.

"It's bad, I know it is. There's something wrong with it. Can't we throw it out, Daddy? Please?"

The monkey grinned its endless grin at Hal. He could feel Petey's tears between them. Late morning sun glinted off the monkey's brass cymbals—the light reflected upward and put sunstreaks on the motel's plain white stucco ceiling.

"What time did your mother think she and Dennis would be back, Petey?"

"Around one." He swiped at his red eyes with his shirt-sleeve, looking embarrassed at his tears. But he wouldn't look at the monkey. "I turned on the TV," he whispered. "And I turned it up loud."

"That was all right, Petey."

"I had a crazy idea," Petey said. "I had this idea that if I wound that monkey up, you ... you would have just died there in bed. In your sleep. Wasn't that a crazy idea, Daddy?" His voice had dropped again, and it trembled helplessly.

*How would it have happened?* Hal wondered. *Heart attack? An embolism, like my mother? What? It doesn't really matter, does it?*

And on the heels of that, another, colder thought: *Get rid of it, he says. Throw it out. But can it be gotten rid of? Ever?*

The monkey grinned mockingly at him, its cymbals held a foot apart. Did it suddenly come to life on the night Aunt Ida died? he

or even to drive him into the middle of the lake. He was terrified, but he felt a crazy kind of exhilaration through the terror. The monkey was gone for good this time. He knew it somehow. Whatever happened to him, the monkey would not be back to draw a shadow over Dennis's life, or Petey's. The monkey was gone, perhaps resting on the roof or the hood of Amos Culligan's Studebaker at the bottom of Crystal Lake. Gone for good.

He rowed, bending forward and rocking back. That cracking, crimping sound came again, and now the rusty old bait can that had been lying in the bow of the boat was floating in three inches of water. Spray blew in Hal's face. There was a louder snapping sound, and the bow seat fell in two pieces and floated next to the bait box. A board tore off the left side of the boat, and then another, this one at the waterline, tore off at the right. Hal rowed. Breath rasped in his mouth, hot and dry, and his throat swelled with the coppery taste of exhaustion. His sweaty hair flew.

Now a crack ran directly up the bottom of the rowboat, zigzagged between his feet, and ran up to the bow. Water gushed in; he was in water up to his ankles, then to the swell of calf. He rowed, but the boat's shoreward movement was sludgy now. He didn't dare look behind him to see how close he was getting.

Another board tore loose. The crack running up the center of the boat grew branches, like a tree. Water flooded in.

Hal began to make the oars sprint, breathing in great, failing gasps. He pulled once . . . twice . . . and on the third pull both oar swivels snapped off. He lost one oar, held onto the other. He rose to his feet and began to flail at the water with it. The boat rocked, almost capsized, and spilled him back onto his seat with a thump.

Moments later more boards tore loose, the seat collapsed, and he was lying in the water which filled the bottom of the boat, astounded as its coldness. He tried to get on his knees, desperately thinking: *Petey must not see this, must not see his father drown right in front of his eyes, you're going to swim, dog-paddle if you have to, but do, do something—*

There was another splintering crack—almost a crash—and he was in the water, swimming for the shore as he never had swum in his life . . . and the shore was amazingly close. A minute later he was standing waist-deep in water, not five yards from the beach.

Petey splashed toward him, arms out, screaming and crying and laughing. Hal started toward him and floundered. Petey, chest-deep, floundered.

They caught each other.

Hal, breathing in great, winded gasps, nevertheless hoisted the boy

into his arms and carried him up to the beach where both of them sprawled, panting.

"Daddy? Is it really gone? That monkey?"

"Yes. I think it's really gone."

"The boat fell apart. It just . . . fell apart all around you."

*Disintegrated*, Hal thought, and looked at the boards floating loose on the water forty feet out. They bore no resemblance to the tight, handmade rowboat he had pulled out of the boathouse.

"It's all right now," Hal said, leaning back on his elbows. He shut his eyes and let the sun warm his face.

"Did you see the cloud?" Petey whispered.

"Yes. But I don't see it now . . . do you?"

They looked at the sky. There were scattered white puffs here and there, but no large dark cloud. It was gone, as he had said.

Hal pulled Petey to his feet. "There'll be towels up at the house. Come in." But he paused, looking at his son. "You were crazy, running out there like that."

Petey looked at him solemnly. "You were brave, Daddy."

"Was I?" The thought of bravery had never crossed his mind. Only his fear. The fear had been too big to see anything else. If anything else had indeed been there. "Come on, Pete."

"What are we going to tell Mom?"

Hal smiled. "I dunno, big guy. We'll think of something."

He paused a moment longer, looking at the boards floating on the water. The lake was calm again, sparkling with small wavelets. Suddenly Hal thought of summer people he didn't even know—a man and his son, perhaps, fishing for the big one. *I've got something Dad!* the boy screams. *Well reel it up and let's see, the father says, and coming up from the depths, weeds draggling from its cymbals, grinning its terrible, welcoming grin . . . the monkey.*

*He shuddered—but those were only things that might be.*

"Come on," he said to Petey again, and they walked up the path through the flaming October woods toward the home place.

*From the Bridgton News*

*October 24, 1980:*

**MYSTERY  
OF THE DEAD FISH  
BY BETSY MORIARTY**

HUNDREDS of dead fish were found floating belly-up on Crystal Lake in the neighboring township of Casco late last week. The largest numbers appeared to have died in the vicinity of Hunter's Point, although the lake's currents make this a bit difficult to determine. The dead fish included all types commonly found in these waters—bluegills, pickerel, sunnies, carp, brown and rainbow trout, even one landlocked salmon. Fish and Game authorities say they are mystified, and caution fishermen and women not to eat any sort of fish from Crystal Lake until tests have determined . . .

# ARTHUR CONAN DOYLE

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## The Parasite

*Sir Arthur Conan Doyle (1859-1930) scarcely needs any introduction. As the creator of Sherlock Holmes, Doyle is assured immortality. And yet, as Doyle himself feared, the success of the Holmes stories overshadowed his other fiction. Doyle always had a penchant for ghost and horror stories. His first story submitted for publication, 'The Haunted Grange of Gresthorpe', was a spoof ghost story, whilst his first successful sale, 'The Mystery of Sasassa Valley' (1879) was a suspense thriller with supernatural suggestions. Many of Doyle's early stories fall into the category of the weird and the supernatural and they have a conviction and originality which, curiously, is lacking in his later works when he fell under the spell of spiritualism. One of his early and lesser known short novels is 'The Parasite', originally serialised in the prestigious Harper's Weekly during November 1884.*

**M**arch 24. The spring is fairly with us now. Outside my laboratory window the great chestnut-tree is all covered with the big, glutinous, gummy buds, some of which have already begun to break into little green shuttlecocks. As you walk down the lanes you are conscious of the rich, silent forces of nature working all around you. The wet earth smells fruitful and luscious. Green shoots are peeping out everywhere. The twigs are stiff with their sap; and the moist, heavy English air is laden with a faintly resinous perfume. Buds in the hedges, lambs beneath them—everywhere the work of reproduction going forward!

I can see it without, and I can feel it within. We also have our spring when the little arterioles dilate, the lymph flows in a brisker stream, the glands work harder, winnowing and straining. Every year nature readjusts the whole machine. I can feel the ferment in my blood at this very moment, and as the cool sunshine pours through my window I could dance about in it like a gnat. So I should, only that Charles Sadler would rush upstairs to know what was the matter. Besides, I must remember that I am Professor Gilroy. An old professor may afford to be natural, but when fortune has given one of the first chairs in the university to a man of four-and-thirty he must try and act the part consistently.

What a fellow Wilson is! If I could only throw the same enthusiasm into physiology that he does into psychology. I should become a Claude Bernard at the least. His whole life and soul and energy work to one end. He drops to sleep collating his results of the past day, and he wakes to plan his researches for the coming one. And yet, outside the narrow circle who follow his proceedings, he gets so little credit for it. Physiology is a recognized science. If I add even a brick to the edifice, every one sees and applauds it. But Wilson is trying to dig the foundations for a science of the future. His work is underground and does not show. Yet he goes on uncomplainingly, corresponding with a hundred semi-maniacs in the hope of finding one reliable witness, sifting a hundred on the chance of gaining one little speck of truth, collating old books, devouring new ones, experimenting, lecturing, trying to light up in others the fiery interest which is consuming him. I am filled with wonder and admiration when I think of him, and yet, when he asks me to associate myself with his researches, I am compelled to tell him that, in their present state, they offer little attraction to a man who is devoted to exact science. If he could show me something positive and objective, I might than be tempted to approach the question from its physiological side. So long as half his subjects are tainted with *charlatanerie* and the other half with hysteria we physiologists must content ourselves with the



body and leave the mind to our descendants.

No doubt I am a materialist. Agatha says that I am a rank one. I tell her that is an excellent reason for shortening our engagement, since I am in such urgent need of her spirituality. And yet I may claim to be a curious example of the effect of education upon temperament, for by nature I am, unless I deceive myself, a highly psychic man. I was a nervous, sensitive boy, a dreamer, a somnambulist, full of impressions and intuitions. My black hair, my dark eyes, my thin, olive face, my tapering fingers, are all characteristic of my real temperament, and cause experts like Wilson to claim me as their own. But my brain is soaked with exact knowledge. I have trained myself to deal only with fact and with proof. Surmise and fancy have no place in my scheme of thought. Show me what I can see with my microscope, cut with my scalpel, weigh in my balance, and I will devote a lifetime to its investigation. But when you ask me to study feelings, impressions, suggestions, you ask me to do what is distasteful and even demoralizing. A departure from pure reason affects me like an evil smell or a musical discord.

Which is a very sufficient reason why I am a little loath to go to Professor Wilson's to-night. Still I feel that I could hardly get out of the invitation without positive rudeness, and, now that Mrs. Marden and Agatha are going, of course I would not if I could. But I had rather meet them anywhere else. I know that Wilson would draw me into this nebulous semi-science of his if he could. In his enthusiasm he is perfectly impervious to hints or remonstrances. Nothing short of a positive quarrel will make him realize my aversion to the whole business. I have no doubt that he has some new mesmerist or clairvoyant or medium or trickster of some sort whom he is going to exhibit to us, for even his entertainments bear upon his hobby. Well, it will be a treat for Agatha, at any rate. She is interested in it, as woman usually is in whatever is vague and mystical and indefinite.

10.50 P.M. This diary-keeping of mine is, I fancy, the outcome of that scientific habit of mind about which I wrote this morning. I like to register impressions while they are fresh. Once a day at least I endeavor to define my own mental position. It is a useful piece of self-analysis, and has, I fancy, a steadying effect upon the character. Frankly, I must confess that my own needs what stiffening I can give it. I fear that, after all, much of my neurotic temperament survives, and that I am far from that cool, calm precision which characterizes Murdoch or Pratt-Haldane. Otherwise, why should the tomfoolery which I have witnessed this evening have set my nerves thrilling so that even now I am all unstrung? My only comfort is that neither

Wilson nor Miss Penclosa nor even Agatha could have possibly known my weakness.

And what in the world was there to excite me? Nothing, or so little that it will seem ludicrous when I set it down.

The Mardens got to Wilson's before me. In fact, I was one of the last to arrive and found the room crowded. I had hardly time to say a word to Mrs. Marden and to Agatha, who was looking charming in white and pink, with glittering wheat-ears in her hair, when Wilson came twitching at my sleeve.

"You want something positive, Gilroy," said he, drawing me apart into a corner. "My dear fellow, I have a phenomenon—a phenomenon!"

I should have been more impressed had I not heard the same before. His sanguine spirit turns every fire-fly into a star.

"No possible question about the *bona fides* this time," said he, in answer, perhaps, to some little gleam of amusement in my eyes. "My wife has known her for many years. They both come from Trinidad, you know. Miss Penclosa has only been in England a month or two, and knows no one outside the university circle, but I assure you that the things she has told us suffice in themselves to establish clairvoyance upon an absolutely scientific basis. There is nothing like her, amateur or professional. Come and be introduced!"

I like none of these mystery-mongers, but the amateur least of all. With the paid performer you may pounce upon him and expose him the instant that you have seen through his trick. He is there to deceive you, and you are there to find him out. But what are you to do with the friend of your host's wife? Are you to turn on a light suddenly and expose her slapping a surreptitious banjo? Or are you to hurl cochineal over her evening frock when she steals round with her phosphorus bottle and her supernatural platitude? There would be a scene, and you would be looked upon as a brute. So you have your choice of being that or a dupe. I was in no very good humor as I followed Wilson to the lady.

Any one less like my idea of a West Indian could not be imagined. She was a small, frail creature, well over forty, I should say, with a pale, peaky face, and hair of a very light shade of chestnut. Her presence was insignificant and her manner retiring. In any group of ten women she would have been the last whom one would have picked out. Her eyes were perhaps her most remarkable, and also, I am compelled to say, her least pleasant, feature. They were gray in color,—gray with a shade of green,—and their expression struck me as being decidedly furtive. I wonder if furtive is the word, or should I have said fierce? On second thoughts, feline would have expressed it better. A crutch leaning against the wall told me what was painfully evi-

dent when she rose: that one of her legs was crippled.

So I was introduced to Miss Penclosa, and it did not escape me that as my name was mentioned she glanced across at Agatha. Wilson had evidently been talking. And presently, no doubt, thought I, she will inform me by occult means that I am engaged to a young lady with wheat-ears in her hair. I wondered how much more Wilson had been telling her about me.

"Professor Gilroy is a terrible sceptic," said he; "I hope, Miss Penclosa, that you will be able to convert him."

She looked keenly up at me.

"Professor Gilroy is quite right to be sceptical if he has not seen any thing convincing," said she. "I should have thought," she added, "that you would yourself have been an excellent subject."

"For what, may I ask?" said I.

"Well, for mesmerism, for example."

"My experience has been that mesmerists go for their subjects to those who are mentally unsound. All their results are vitiated, as it seems to me, by the fact that they are dealing with abnormal organisms."

"Which of these ladies would you say possessed a normal organism?" she asked. "I should like you to select the one who seems to you to have the best balanced mind. Should we say the girl in pink and white?—Miss Agatha Marden, I think the name is."

"Yes, I should attach weight to any results from her."

"I have never tried how far she is impressionable. Of course some people respond much more rapidly than others. May I ask how far your scepticism extends? I suppose that you admit the mesmeric sleep and the power of suggestion."

"I admit nothing, Miss Penclosa."

"Dear me, I thought science had got further than that. Of course I know nothing about the scientific side of it. I only know what I can do. You see the girl in red, for example, over near the Japanese jar. I shall will that she come across to us."

She bent forward as she spoke and dropped her fan upon the floor. The girl whisked round and came straight toward us, with an enquiring look upon her face, as if some one had called her.

"What do you think of that, Gilroy?" cried Wilson, in a kind of ecstasy.

I did not dare to tell him what I thought of it. To me it was the most barefaced, shameless piece of imposture that I had ever witnessed. The collusion and the signal had really been too obvious.

"Professor Gilroy is not satisfied," said she, glancing up at me with her strange little eyes. "My poor fan is to get the credit of that experi-

ment. Well, we must try something else. Miss Marden, would you have any objection to my putting you off?"

"Oh, I should love it!" cried Agatha.

By this time all the company had gathered round us in a circle, the shirt-fronted men, and the white-throated women, some awed, some critical, as though it were something between a religious ceremony and a conjurer's entertainment. A red velvet arm-chair had been pushed into the centre, and Agatha lay back in it, a little flushed and trembling slightly from excitement. I could see it from the vibration of the wheat-ears. Miss Penclosa rose from her seat and stood over her, leaning upon her crutch.

And there was a change in the woman. She no longer seemed small or insignificant. Twenty years were gone from her age. Her eyes were shining, a tinge of color had come into her sallow cheeks, her whole figure had expanded. So I have seen a dull-eyed, listless lad change in an instant into briskness and life when given a task of which he felt himself master. She looked down at Agatha with an expression which I resented from the bottom of my soul—the expression with which a Roman empress might have looked at her kneeling slave. Then with a quick, commanding gesture she tossed up her arms and swept them slowly down in front of her.

I was watching Agatha narrowly. During three passes she seemed to be simply amused. At the fourth I observed a slight glazing of her eyes, accompanied by some dilation of her pupils. At the sixth there was a momentary rigor. At the seventh her lids began to droop. At the tenth her eyes were closed, and her breathing was slower and fuller than usual. I tried as I watched to preserve my scientific calm, but a foolish, causeless agitation convulsed me. I trust that I hid it, but I felt as a child feels in the dark. I could not have believed that I was still open to such weakness.

"She is in the trance," said Miss Penclosa.

"She is sleeping!" I cried.

"Wake her, then!"

I pulled her by the arm and shouted in her ear. She might have been dead for all the impression that I could make. Her body was there on the velvet chair. Her organs were acting—her heart, her lungs. But her soul! It had slipped from beyond our ken. Whither had it gone? What power had dispossessed it? I was puzzled and disconcerted.

"So much for the mesmeric sleep," said Miss penclosa. "As regards suggestion, whatever I may suggest Miss Marden will infallibly do, whether it be now or after she has awakened from her trance, Do you demand proof of it?" "Certainly," said I.

"You shall have it." I saw a smile pass over her face, as though an amusing thought had struck her. She stooped and whispered earnestly into her subject's ear. Agatha, who had been so deaf to me, nodded her head as she listened.

"Awake!" cried Miss Penclosa, with a sharp tap of her crutch upon the floor. The eyes opened, the glazing cleared slowly away, and the soul looked out once more after its strange eclipse.

We went away early. Agatha was none the worse for her strange excursion, but I was nervous and unstrung, unable to listen to or answer the stream of comments which Wilson was pouring out for my benefit. As I bade her good-night Miss Penclosa slipped a piece of paper into my hand.

"Pray forgive me," said she, "if I take means to overcome your scepticism. Open this note at ten o'clock to-morrow morning. It is a little private test."

I can't imagine what she means, but there is the note, and it shall be opened as she directs. My head is aching, and I have written enough for to-night. Tomorrow I dare say that what seems so inexplicable will take quite another complexion. I shall not surrender my convictions without a struggle.

**March 25.** I am amazed, confounded. It is clear that I must reconsider my opinion upon this matter. But first let me place on record what has occurred.

I had finished breakfast, and was looking over some diagrams with which my lecture is to be illustrated, when my housekeeper entered to tell me that Agatha was in my study and wished to see me immediately. I glanced at the clock and saw with surprise that it was only half-past nine.

When I entered the room, she was standing on the hearth-rug facing me. Something in her pose chilled me and checked the words which were rising to my lips. Her veil was half down, but I could see that she was pale and that her expression was constrained.

"Austin," she said, "I have come to tell you that our engagement is at an end."

I staggered. I believe that I literally did stagger. I know that I found myself leaning against the bookcase for support.

"But-but—" I stammered. "This is very sudden, Agatha."

"Yes, Austin, I have come here to tell you that our engagement is at an end."

"But surely," I cried, "you will give me some reason! This is unlike you, Agatha. Tell me how I have been unfortunate enough to offend you."

"It is all over, Austin."

"But why? You must be under some delusion, Agatha. Perhaps you have been told some falsehood about me. Or you may have misunderstood something that I have said to you. Only let me know what it is, and a word may set it all right."

"We must consider it all at an end."

"But you left me last night without a hint at any disagreement. What could have occurred in the interval to change you so? It must have been something that happened last night. You have been thinking it over and you have disapproved of my conduct. Was it the mesmerism? Did you blame me for letting that woman exercise her power over you? You know that at the least sign I should have interfered."

"It is useless, Austin. All is over."

Her voice was cold and measured; her manner strangely formal and hard. It seemed to me that she was absolutely resolved not to be drawn into any argument or explanation. As for me, I was shaking with agitation, and I turned my face aside, so ashamed was I that she should see my want of control.

"You must know what this means to me!" I cried. "It is the blasting of all my hopes and the ruin of my life! You surely will not inflict such a punishment upon me unheard. You will let me know what is the matter. Consider how impossible it would be for me, under any circumstances, to treat you so. For God's sake, Agatha, let me know what I have done!"

She walked past me without a word and opened the door.

"It is quite useless, Austin," said she. "You must consider our engagement at an end." An instant later she was gone, and, before I could recover myself sufficiently to follow her, I heard the hall-door close behind her.

I rushed into my room to change my coat, with the idea of hurrying round to Mrs. Marden's to learn from her what the cause of my misfortune might be. So shaken was I that I could hardly lace my boots. Never shall I forget those horrible ten minutes. I had just pulled on my overcoat when the clock upon the mantel-piece struck ten.

Ten! I associated the idea with Miss Penclosa's note. It was lying before me on the table, and I tore it open. It was scribbled in pencil in a peculiarly angular handwriting.

"MY DEAR PROFESSOR GILROY [it said]: Pray excuse the personal nature of the test which I am giving you. Professor Wilson happened to mention the relations between you and my subject of this evening, and it struck me that nothing could be more convincing to you than if I were to suggest to Miss

Marden that she should call upon you at half-past nine to-morrow morning and suspend your engagement for half an hour or so. Science is so exacting that it is difficult to give a satisfying test, but I am convinced that this at least will be an action which she would be most unlikely to do of her own free will. Forget any thing that she may have said, as she has really nothing whatever to do with it, and will certainly not recollect any thing about it. I write this note to shorten your anxiety, and to beg you to forgive me for the momentary unhappiness which my suggestion must have caused you.

“Yours faithfully,  
“HELEN PENCLOSA”

Really, when I had read the note, I was too relieved to be angry. It was a liberty. Certainly it was a very great liberty indeed on the part of a lady whom I had only met once. But, after all, I had challenged her by my scepticism. It may have been, as she said, a little difficult to devise a test which would satisfy me.

And she had done that. There could be no question at all upon the point. For me hypnotic suggestion was finally established. It took its place from now onward as one of the facts of life. That Agatha, who of all women of my acquaintance has the best balanced mind, had been reduced to a condition of automatism appeared to be certain. A person at a distance had worked her as an engineer on the shore might guide a Brennan torpedo. A second soul had stepped in, as it were, had pushed her own aside, and had seized her nervous mechanism, saying: “I will work this for half an hour.” And Agatha must have been unconscious as she came and as she returned. Could she make her way in safety through the streets in such a state? I put on my hat and hurried round to see if all was well with her.

Yes. She was at home. I was shown into the drawing-room and found her sitting with a book upon her lap.

“You are an early visitor, Austin,” said she, smiling.

“And you have been an even earlier one,” I answered.

She looked puzzled. “What do you mean?” she asked.

“You have not been out to-day?”

“No, certainly not.”

“Agatha,” said I seriously, “would you mind telling me exactly what you have done this morning?”

She laughed at my earnestness.

“You’ve got on your professional look, Austin. See what comes of being engaged to a man of science. However, I will tell you, though I don’t image what you want to know for. I got up at eight. I

breakfasted at half-past. I came into this room at ten minutes past nine and began to read the 'Memoirs of Mme. de Remusat.' In a few minutes I did the French lady the bad compliment of dropping to sleep over her pages, and I did you, sir, the very flattering one of dreaming about you. It is only a few minutes since I woke up."

"And found yourself where you had been before?"

"Why, where else should I find myself?"

"Would you mind telling me, Agatha, what it was that you dreamed about me? It really is not mere curiosity on my part."

"I merely had a vague impression that you came into it. I cannot recall any thing definite."

"If you have not been out to-day, Agatha, how is it that your shoes are dusty?"

A pained look came over her face.

"Really, Austin, I do not know what is the matter with you this morning. One would almost think that you doubted my word. If my boots are dusty, it must be, of course, that I have put on a pair which the maid had not cleaned."

It was perfectly evident that she knew nothing whatever about the matter, and I reflected that, after all, perhaps it was better that I should not enlighten her. It might frighten her, and could serve no good purpose that I could see. I said no more about it, therefore, and left shortly afterward to give my lecture.

But I am immensely impressed. My horizon of scientific possibilities has suddenly been enormously extended. I no longer wonder at Wilson's demonic energy and enthusiasm. Who would not work hard who had a vast virgin field ready to his hand? Why, I have known the novel shape of a nucleolus, or a trifling peculiarity of striped muscular fibre seen under a 300-diameter lens, fill me with exultation. How petty do such researches seem when compared with this one which strikes at the very roots of life and the nature of the soul! I had always looked upon spirit as a product of matter. The brain, I thought, secreted the mind, as the liver does the bile. But how can this be when I see mind working from a distance and playing upon matter as a musician might upon a violin? The body does not give rise to the soul, then, but is rather the rough instrument by which the spirit manifests itself. The windmill does not give rise to the wind, but only indicates it. It was opposed to my whole habit of thought, and yet it was undeniably possible and worthy of investigation.

And why should I not investigate it? I see that under yesterday's date I said: "If I could see something positive and objective, I might be tempted to approach it from the physiological aspect." Well, I have got my test. I shall be as good as my word. The investigation



would, I am sure, be of immense interest. Some of my colleagues might look askance at it, for science is full of unreasoning prejudices, but if Wilson has the courage of his convictions, I can afford to have it also. I shall go to him to-morrow morning—to him and to Miss Penclosa. If she can show us so much, it is probable that she can show us more.

## 2

MARCH 26. Wilson was, as I had anticipated, very exultant over my conversion, and Miss Penclosa was also demurely pleased at the result of her experiment. Strange what a silent, colorless creature she is save only when she exercises her power! Even talking about it gives her color and life. She seems to take a singular interest in me. I cannot help observing how her eyes follow me about the room.

We had the most interesting conversation about her own powers. It is just as well to put her views on record, though they cannot, of course, claim any scientific weight.

"You are on the very fringe of the subject," said she, when I had expressed wonder at the remarkable instance of suggestion which she had shown me. "I had no direct influence upon Miss Marden when she came round to you. I was not even thinking of her that morning. What I did was to set her mind as I might set the alarm of a clock so that at the hour named it would go off of its own accord. If six months instead of twelve hours had been suggested, it would have been the same."

"And if the suggestion had been to assassinate me?"

"She would most inevitably have done so."

"But this is a terrible power!" I cried.

"It is, as you say, a terrible power," she answered gravely, "and the more you know of it the more terrible will it seem to you."

"May I ask," said I, "what you meant when you said that this matter of suggestion is only at the fringe of it? What do you consider the essential?"

"I had rather not tell you."

I was surprised at the decision of her answer.

"You understand," said I, "that it is not out of curiosity I ask, but in the hope that I may find some scientific explanation for the facts with which you furnish me."

"Frankly, Professor Gilroy," said she, "I am not at all interested

in science, nor do I care whether it can or cannot classify these powers."

"But I was hoping--"

"Ah, that is quite another thing. If you make it a personal matter," said she, with the pleasantest of smiles, "I shall be only too happy to tell you any thing you wish to know. Let me see; what was it you asked me? Oh, about the further powers. Professor Wilson won't believe in them, but they are quite true all the same. For example, it is possible for an operator to gain complete command over his subject--presuming that the latter is a good one. Without any previous suggestion he may make him do whatever he likes."

"Without the subject's knowledge?"

"That depends. If the force were strongly exerted, he would know no more about it than Miss Marden did when she came round and frightened you so. Or, if the influence was less powerful, he might be conscious of what he was doing, but be quite unable to prevent himself from doing it."

"Would he have lost his own will power, then?"

"It would be over-ridden by another stronger one."

"Have you ever exercised this power yourself?"

"Several times."

"Is your own will so strong, then?"

"Well, it does not entirely depend upon that. Many have strong wills which are not detachable from themselves. The thing is to have the gift of projecting it into another person and superseding his own. I find that the power varies with my own strength and health."

"Practically, you send your soul into another person's body."

"Well, you might put it that way."

"And what does your own body do?"

"It merely feels lethargic."

"Well, but is there no danger to your own health?" I asked.

"There might be a little. You have to be careful never to let your own consciousness absolutely go; otherwise, you might experience some difficulty in finding your way back again. You must always preserve the connection, as it were. I am afraid I express myself very badly, Professor Gilroy, but of course I don't know how to put these things in a scientific way. I am just giving you my own experiences and my own explanations."

Well, I read this over now at my leisure, and I marvel at myself! Is this Austin Gilroy, the man who has won his way to the front by his hard reasoning power and by his devotion to fact? Here I am gravely retailing the gossip of a woman who tells me how her soul may be projected from her body, and how, while she lies in a lethargy,

she can control the actions of people at a distance. Do I accept it? Certainly not. She must prove and re-prove before I yield a point. But if I am still a sceptic, I have at least ceased to be a scoffer. We are to have a sitting this evening, and she is to try if she can produce any mesmeric effect upon me. If she can, it will make an excellent starting-point for our investigation. No one can accuse *me*, at any rate, of complicity. If she cannot, we must try and find some subject who will be like Caesar's wife. Wilson is perfectly impervious.

10 P.M. I believe that I am on the threshold of an epoch-making investigation. To have the power of examining these phenomena from inside—to have an organism which will respond, and at the same time a brain which will appreciate and criticise—that is surely a unique advantage. I am quite sure that Wilson would give five years of his life to be as susceptible as I have proved myself to be.

There was no one present except Wilson and his wife. I was seated with my head leaning back, and Miss Penclosa, standing in front and a little to the left, used the same long, sweeping strokes as with Agatha. At each of them a warm current of air seemed to strike me, and to suffuse a thrill and glow all through me from head to foot. My eyes were fixed upon Miss Penclosa's face, but as I gazed the features seemed to blur and to fade away. I was conscious only of her own eyes looking down at me, gray, deep, inscrutable. Larger they grew and larger, until they changed suddenly into two mountain lakes toward which I seemed to be falling with horrible rapidity. I shuddered, and as I did so some deeper stratum of thought told me that the shudder represented the rigor which I had observed in Agatha. An instant later I struck the surface of the lakes, now joined into one and down I went beneath the water with a fulness in my head and a buzzing in my ears. Down I went, down, down, and then with a swoop up again until I could see the light streaming brightly through the green water. I was almost at the surface when the word "Awake!" rang through my head, and, with a start, I found myself back in the arm-chair, with Miss Penclosa leaning on her crutch, and Wilson, his note-book in his hand, peeping over her shoulder. No heaviness or weariness was left behind. On the contrary, though it is only an hour or so since the experiment, I feel so wakeful that I am more inclined for my study than my bedroom. I see quite a vista of interesting experiments extending before us, and am all impatience to begin upon them.

March 27. A blank day, as Miss Penclosa goes with Wilson and his wife to the Suttons'. Have begun Binet and Ferre's "Animal Magnetism." What strange, deep waters these are! Results, results, results—and the cause an absolute mystery. It is stimulating to the

imagination, but I must be on my guard against that. Let us have no inferences nor deductions, and nothing but solid facts. I *know* that the mesmeric trance is true; I *know* that mesmeric suggestion is true; I *know* that I am myself sensitive to this force. That is my present position. I have a large new note-book which shall be devoted entirely to scientific detail.

Long talk with Agatha and Mrs. Marden in the evening about our marriage. We think that the summer vac. (the beginning of it) would be the best time for the wedding. Why should we delay? I grudge even those few months. Still, as Mrs. Marden says, there are a good many things to be arranged.

March 28. Mesmerized again by Miss Penclosa. Experience much the same as before, save that insensibility came on more quickly. See Note-book A for temperature of room, barometric pressure, pulse, and respiration as taken by Professor Wilson.

March 29. Mesmerized again. Details in Note-book A.

March 30. Sunday, and a blank day. I grudge any interruption of our experiments. At present they merely embrace the physical signs which go with slight, with complete, and with extreme insensibility. Afterward we hope to pass on to the phenomena of suggestion and of lucidity. Professors have demonstrated these things upon women at Nancy and at the Salpetriere. It will be more convincing when a woman demonstrates it upon a professor, with a second professor as a witness. And that I should be the subject—I, the sceptic, the materialist! At least, I have shown that my devotion to science is greater than to my own personal consistency. The eating of our own words is the greatest sacrifice which truth ever requires of us.

My neighbor, Charles Sadler, the handsome young demonstrator of anatomy, came in this evening to return a volume of Virchow's "Archives" which I had lent him. I call him young, but, as a matter of fact, he is a year older than I am.

"I understand, Gilroy," said he, "that you are being experimented upon by Miss Penclosa.

"Well," he went on, when I had acknowledged it, "if I were you, I should not let it go any further. You will think me very impertinent, no doubt, but, none the less, I feel it to be my duty to advise you to have no more to do with her."

Of course I asked him why.

"I am so placed that I cannot enter into particulars as freely as I could wish," said he. "Miss Penclosa is the friend of my friend, and my position is a delicate one. I can only say this: that I have myself been the subject of some of the woman's experiments, and that they have left a most unpleasant impression upon my mind."

He could hardly expect me to be satisfied with that, and I tried hard to get something more definite out of him, but without success. Is it conceivable that he could be jealous at my having superseded him? Or is he one of those men of science who feel personally injured when facts run counter to their preconceived opinions? He cannot seriously suppose that because he has some vague grievance I am, therefore, to abandon a series of experiments which promise to be so fruitful of results. He appeared to be annoyed at the light way in which I treated his shadowy warnings, and we parted with some little coldness on both sides.

March 31. Mesmerized by Miss P.

April 1. Mesmerized by Miss P. (Note-book A.)

April 2. Mesmerized by Miss P. (Sphygmographic chart taken by Professor Wilson.)

April 3. It is possible that this course of mesmerism may be a little trying to the general constitution. Agatha says that I am thinner and darker under the eyes. I am conscious of a nervous irritability which I had not observed in myself before. The least noise, for example, makes me start, and the stupidity of a student causes me exasperation instead of amusement. Agatha wishes me to stop, but I tell her that every course of study is trying, and that one can never attain a result without paying some price for it. When she sees the sensation which my forthcoming paper on "The Relation between Mind and Matter" may make, she will understand that it is worth a little nervous wear and tear. I should not be surprised if I got my F.R.S. over it.

Mesmerized again in the evening. The effect is produced more rapidly now, and the subjective visions are less marked. I keep full notes of each sitting. Wilson is leaving for town for a week or ten days, but we shall not interrupt the experiments, which depend for their value as much upon my sensations as on his observations.

April 4. I must be carefully on my guard. A complication has crept into our experiments which I had not reckoned upon. In my eagerness for scientific facts I have been foolishly blind to the human relations between Miss Penclosa and myself. I can write here what I would not breathe to a living soul. The unhappy woman appears to have formed an attachment for me.

I should not say such a thing, even in the privacy of my own intimate journal, if it had not come to such a pass that it is impossible to ignore it. For some time,—that is, for the last week,—there have been signs which I have brushed aside and refused to think of. Her brightness when I come, her dejection when I go, her eagerness that I should come often, the expression of her eyes, the tone of her voice—I

tried to think that they meant nothing, and were, perhaps, only her ardent West Indian manner. But last night, as I awoke from the mesmeric sleep, I put out my hand, unconsciously, involuntarily, and clasped hers. When I came fully to myself, we were sitting with them locked, she looking up at me with an expectant smile. And the horrible thing was that I felt impelled to say what she expected me to say. What a false wretch I should have been! How I should have loathed myself to-day had I yielded to the temptation of that moment! But, thank God, I was strong enough to spring up and hurry from the room. I was rude, I fear, but I could not, no, I *could* not, trust myself another moment. I, a gentleman, a man of honor, engaged to one of the sweetest girls in England—and yet in a moment of reasonless passion I nearly professed love for this woman whom I hardly know. She is far older than myself and a cripple. It is monstrous, odious; and yet the impulse was so strong that, had I stayed another minute in her presence, I should have committed myself. What was it? I have to teach others the workings of our organism, and what do I know of it myself? Was it the sudden upcropping of some lower stratum in my nature—a brutal primitive instinct suddenly asserting itself? I could almost believe the tales of obsession by evil spirits, so overmastering was the feeling.

Well, the incident places me in a most unfortunate position. On the one hand, I am very loath to abandon a series of experiments which have already gone so far, and which promise such brilliant results. On the other, if this unhappy woman has conceived a passion for me—But surely even now I must have made some hideous mistake. She, with her age and her deformity! It is impossible. And then she knew about Agatha. She understood how I was placed. She only smiled out of amusement, perhaps, when in my dazed state I seized her hand. It was my half-mesmerized brain which gave it a meaning, and sprang with such bestial swiftness to meet it. I wish I could persuade myself that it was indeed so. On the whole, perhaps, my wisest plan would be to postpone our other experiments until Wilson's return. I have written a note to Miss Penclosa, therefore, making no allusion to last night, but saying that a press of work would cause me to interrupt our sittings for a few days. She has answered, formally enough, to say that if I should change my mind I should find her at home at the usual hour.

10 P.M. Well, well, what a thing of straw I am! I am coming to know myself better of late, and the more I know the lower I fall in my own estimation. Surely I was not always so weak as this. At four o'clock I should have smiled had any one told me that I should go to Miss Penclosa's to-night, and yet, at eight, I was at Wilson's door

as usual. I don't know how it occurred. The influence of habit, I suppose. Perhaps there is a mesmeric craze as there is an opium craze, and I am a victim to it. I only know that as I worked in my study I became more and more uneasy. I fidgeted. I worried. I could not concentrate my mind upon the papers in front of me. And then, at last, almost before I knew what I was doing, I seized my hat and hurried round to keep my usual appointment.

We had an interesting evening. Mrs. Wilson was present during most of the time, which prevented the embarrassment which one at least of us must have felt. Miss Penclosa's manner was quite the same as usual, and she expressed no surprise at my having come in spite of my note. There was nothing in her bearing to show that yesterday's incident had made any impression upon her, and so I am inclined to hope that I overrated it.

April 6 (evening). No, no, no, I did not overrate it. I can no longer attempt to conceal from myself that this woman has conceived a passion for me. It is monstrous, but it is true. Again, tonight, I awoke from the mesmeric trance to find my hand in hers, and to suffer that odious feeling which urges me to throw away my honor, my career, every thing, for the sake of this creature who, as I can plainly see when I am away from her influence, possesses no single charm upon earth. But when I am near her, I do not feel this. She rouses something in me, something evil, something I had rather not think of. She paralyzes my better nature, too, at the moment when she stimulates my worse. Decidedly it is not good for me to be near her.

Last night was worse than before. Instead of flying I actually sat for some time with my hand in hers talking over the most intimate subjects with her. We spoke of Agatha, among other things. What could I have been dreaming of? Miss Penclosa said that she was conventional, and I agreed with her. She spoke once or twice in a disparaging way of her, and I did not protest. What a creature I have been!

Weak as I have proved myself to be, I am still strong enough to bring this sort of thing to an end. It shall not happen again. I have sense enough to fly when I cannot fight. From this Sunday night onward I shall never sit with Miss Penclosa again. Never! Let the experiments go, let the research come to an end; any thing is better than facing this monstrous temptation which drags me so low. I have said nothing to Miss Penclosa, but I shall simply stay away. She can tell the reason without any words of mine.

April 7. Have stayed away as I said. It is a pity to ruin such an interesting investigation, but it would be a greater pity still to ruin my life, and I *know* that I can not trust myself with that woman.

11 P.M. God help me! What is the matter with me? Am I going

mad? Let me try and be calm and reason with myself. First of all I shall set down exactly what occurred.

It was nearly eight when I wrote the lines with which this day begins. Feeling strangely restless and uneasy, I left my rooms and walked round to spend the evening with Agatha and her mother. They both remarked that I was pale and haggard. About nine Professor Pratt-Haldane came in, and we played a game of whist. I tried hard to concentrate my attention upon the cards, but the feeling of restlessness grew and grew until I found it impossible to struggle against it. I simply *could* not sit still at the table. At last, in the very middle of a hand, I threw my cards down and, with some sort of an incoherent apology about having an appointment, I rushed from the room. As if in a dream I have a vague recollection of tearing through the hall, snatching my hat from the stand, and slamming the door behind me. As in a dream, too, I have the impression of the double line of gas-lamps, and my bespattered boots tell me that I must have run down the middle of the road. It was all misty and strange and un-natural. I came to Wilson's house; I saw Mrs. Wilson and I saw Miss Penclosa. I hardly recall what we talked about, but I do remember that Miss P. shook the head of her crutch at me in a playful way, and accused me of being late and of losing interest in our experiments. There was no mesmerism, but I stayed some time and have only just returned.

My brain is quite clear again now, and I can think over what has occurred. It is absurd to suppose that it is merely weakness and force of habit. I tried to explain it in that way the other night, but it will no longer suffice. It is something much deeper and more terrible than that. Why, when I was at the Mardens' whist-table, I was dragged away as if the noose of a rope had been cast round me. I can no longer disguise it from myself. The woman has her grip upon me. I am in her clutch. But I must keep my head and reason it out and see what is best to be done.

But what a blind fool I have been! In my enthusiasm over my research I have walked straight into the pit, although it lay gaping before me. Did she not herself warn me? Did she not tell me, as I can read in my own journal, that when she has acquired power over a subject she can make him do her will? And she has acquired that power over me. I am for the moment at the beck and call of this creature with the crutch. I must come when she wills it. I must do as she wills. Worst of all, I must feel as she wills. I loathe her and fear her, yet, while I am under the spell, she can doubtless make me love her.

There is some consolation in the thought, then, that those odious



impulses for which I have blamed myself do not really come from me at all. They are all transferred from her, little as I could have guessed it at the time. I feel cleaner and lighter for the thought.

April 8. Yes, now, in broad daylight, writing coolly and with time for reflection, I am compelled to confirm every thing which I wrote in my journal last night. I am in a horrible position, but, above all, I must not lose my head. I must pit my intellect against her powers. After all, I am no silly puppet, to dance at the end of a string. I have energy, brains, courage. For all her devil's tricks I may beat her yet. May! I *must*, or what is to become of me?

Let me try to reason it out! This woman, by her own explanation, can dominate my nervous organism. She can project herself into my body and take command of it. She has a parasite soul; yes, she is a parasite, a monstrous parasite. She creeps into my frame as the hermit crab does into the whelk's shell. I am powerless. What can I do? I am dealing with forces of which I know nothing. And I can tell no one of my trouble. They would set me down as a madman. Certainly, if it got noised abroad, the university would say that they had no need of a devil-ridden professor. And Agatha! No, no, I must face it alone.

### 3

I READ over my notes of what the woman said when she spoke about her powers. There is one point which fills me with dismay. She implies that when the influence is slight the subject knows what he is doing, but cannot control himself, whereas when it is strongly exerted he is absolutely unconscious. Now, I have always known what I did, though less so last night than on the previous occasions. That seems to mean that she has never yet exerted her full powers upon me. Was ever a man so placed before?

Yes, perhaps there was, and very near me, too. Charles Sadler must know something of this! His vague words of warning take a meaning now. Oh, if I had only listened to him then, before I helped by these repeated sittings to forge the links of the chain which binds me! But I will see him to-day. I will apologize to him for having treated his warning so lightly. I will see if he can advise me.

4 P.M. No, he cannot, I have talked with him, and he showed such surprise at the first words in which I tried to express my unspeakable secret that I went no further. As far as I can gather (by hints and

inferences rather than by any statement), his own experience was limited to some words or looks such as I have myself endured. His abandonment of Miss Penclosa is in itself a sign that he was never really in her toils. Oh, if he only knew his escape! He has to thank his phlegmatic Saxon temperament for it. I am black and Celtic, and this hag's clutch is deep in my nerves. Shall I ever get it out? Shall I ever be the same man that I was just one short fortnight ago?

Let me consider what I had better do. I cannot leave the university in middle of the term. If I were free, my course would be obvious. I should start at once and travel in Persia. But would she allow me to start? And could her influence not reach me in Persia, and bring me back to within touch of her crutch? I can only find out the limits of this hellish power by my own bitter experience. I will fight and fight and fight—and what can I do more?

I know very well that about eight o'clock to-night that craving for her society, that irresistible restlessness, will come upon me. How shall I overcome it? What shall I do? I must make it impossible for me to leave the room. I shall lock the door and throw the key out of the window. But, then, what am I to do in the morning? Never mind about the morning. I must at all costs break this chain which holds me.

April 9. Victory! I have done splendidly! At seven o'clock last night I took a hasty dinner, and then locked myself up in my bedroom and dropped the key into the garden. I chose a cheery novel, and lay in bed for three hours trying to read it, but really in a horrible state of trepidation, expecting every instant that I should become conscious of the impulse. Nothing of the sort occurred, however, and I awoke this morning with the feeling that a black nightmare had been lifted off me. Perhaps the creature realized what I had done, and understood that it was useless to try to influence me. At any rate, I have beaten her once, and if I can do it once, I can do it again.

It was most awkward about the key in the morning. Luckily, there was an under-gardener below, and I asked him to throw it up. No doubt he thought I had just dropped it. I will have doors and windows screwed up and six stoutmen to hold me down in my bed before I will surrender myself to be hag-ridden in this way.

I had a note from Mrs. Marden this afternoon asking me to go round and see her. I intended to do so in any case, but had not expected to find bad news waiting for me. It seems that the Armstrongs, from whom Agatha has expectations, are due home from Adelaide in the *Aurora*, and that they have written to Mrs. Marden and her to meet them in town. They will probably be away for a month or six weeks, and, as the *Aurora* is due on Wednesday, they must go at once—

tomorrow, if they are ready in time. My consolation is that when we meet again there will be no more parting between Agatha and me.

"I want you to do one thing, Agatha" said I, when we were alone together. "If you should happen to meet Miss Penclosa, either in town or here, you must promise me never again to allow her to mesmerize you."

Agatha opened her eyes.

"Why, it was only the other day that you were saying how interesting it all was, and how determined you were to finish your experiments."

"I know, but I have changed my mind since then."

"And you won't have it any more?"

"No."

"I am so glad, Austin. You can't think how pale and worn you have been lately. It was really our principal objection to going to London now that we did not wish to leave you when you were so pulled down. And your manner has been so strange occasionally—especially that night when you left poor Professor Pratt-Haldane to play dummy. I am convinced that these experiments are very bad for your nerves."

"I think so, too, dear."

"And for Miss Penclosa's nerves as well. You have heard that she is ill?"

"No."

"Mrs. Wilson told us so last night. She described it as a nervous fever. Professor Wilson is coming back this week, and of course Mrs. Wilson is very anxious that Miss Penclosa should be well again then, for he has quite a programme of experiments which he is anxious to carry out."

I was glad to have Agatha's promise, for it was enough that this woman should have one of us in her clutch. On the other hand, I was disturbed to hear about Miss Penclosa's illness. It rather discounts the victory which I appeared to win last night. I remember that she said that loss of health interfered with her power. That may be why I was able to hold my own so easily. Well, well, I must take the same precautions to-night and see what comes of it. I am childishly frightened when I think of her.

April 10. All went very well last night. I was amused at the gardener's face when I had again to hail him this morning and to ask him to throw up my key. I shall get a name among the servants if this sort of thing goes on. But the great point is that I stayed in my room without the slightest inclination to leave it. I do believe that I am shaking myself clear of this incredible bond—or is it only that the woman's power is in abeyance until she recovers her strength?

I can but pray for the best.

The Mardens left this morning, and the brightness seems to have gone out of the spring sunshine. And yet it is very beautiful also as it gleams on the green chestnuts opposite my windows, and gives a touch of gayety to the heavy, lichen-mottled walls of the old colleges. How sweet and gentle and soothing is Nature! Who would think that there lurked in her also such vile forces, such odious possibilities! For of course I understand that this dreadful thing which has sprung out at me is neither supernatural nor even preternatural. No, it is a natural force which this woman can use and society is ignorant of. The mere fact that it ebbs with her strength shows how entirely it is subject to physical laws. If I had time, I might probe it to the bottom and lay my hands upon its antidote. But you cannot tame the tiger when you are beneath his claws. You can but try to writhe away from him. Ah, when I look in the glass and see my own dark eyes and clear-cut Spanish face, I long for a vitriol splash or a bout of the small-pox. One or the other might have saved me from this calamity.

I am inclined to think that I may have trouble to-night. There are two things which make me fear so. One is that I met Mrs. Wilson in the street, and that she tells me that Miss Penclosa is better, though still weak. I find myself wishing in my heart that the illness had been her last. The other is that Professor Wilson comes back in a day or two, and his presence would act as a constraint upon her. I should not fear our interviews if a third person were present. For both these reasons I have a presentiment of trouble to-night, and I shall take the same precautions as before.

April 10. No, thank God, all went well last night. I really could not face the gardener again. I locked my door and thrust the key underneath it, so that I had to ask the maid to let me out in the morning. But the precaution was really not needed, for I never had any inclination to go out at all. Three evenings in succession at home! I am surely near the end of my troubles, for Wilson will be home again either today or to-morrow. Shall I tell him of what I have gone through or not? I am convinced that I should not have the slightest sympathy from him. He would look upon me as an interesting case, and read a paper about me at the next meeting of the Psychical Society, in which he would gravely discuss the possibility of my being a deliberate liar, and weigh it against the chances of my being in an early stage of lunacy. No, I shall get no comfort out of Wilson.

I am feeling wonderfully fit and well. I don't think I ever lectured with greater spirit. Oh, if I could only get this shadow off my life, how happy I should be! Young, fairly wealth, in the front rank of

my profession, engaged to a beautiful and charming girl—have I not every thing which a man could ask for? Only one thing to trouble me, but what a thing it is!

Midnight. I shall go mad. Yes, that will be the end of it. I shall go mad. I am not far from it now. My head throbs as I rest it on my hot hand. I am quivering all over like a scared horse. Oh, what a night I have had! And yet I have some cause to be satisfied also.

At the risk of becoming the laughing-stock of my own servant, I again slipped my key under the door, imprisoning myself for the night. Then, finding it too early to go to bed, I lay down with my clothes on and began to read one of Dumas's novels. Suddenly I was gripped—gripped and dragged from the couch. It is only thus that I can describe the overpowering nature of the force which pounced upon me. I clawed at the coverlet. I clung to the wood-work. I believe that I screamed out in my frenzy. It was all useless, hopeless. I *must* go. There was no way out of it. It was only at the outset that I resisted. The force soon became too overmastering for that. I thank goodness that there were no watchers there to interfere with me. I could not have answered for myself if there had been. And, besides the determination to get out, there came to me, also, the keenest and coolest judgment in choosing my means. I lit a candle and endeavored, kneeling in front of the door, to pull the key through with the feather-end of a quill pen. It was just too short and pushed it further away. Then with quiet persistence I got a paper-knife out of one of the drawers, and with that I managed to draw the key back. I opened the door, stepped into my study, took a photograph of myself from the bureau, wrote something across it, placed it in the inside pocket of my coat, and then started off for Wilson's.

It was all wonderfully clear, and yet disassociated from the rest of my life, as the incidents of even the most vivid dream might be. A peculiar double consciousness possessed me. There was the predominant alien will, which was bent upon drawing me to the side of its owner, and there was the feebler protesting personality, which I recognized as being myself, tugging feebly at the overmastering impulse as a led terrier might at its chain. I can remember recognizing these two conflicting forces, but I recall nothing of my walk, nor of how I was admitted to the house.

Very vivid, however, is my recollection of how I met Miss Penclosa. She was reclining on the sofa in the little boudoir in which our experiments had usually been carried out. Her head was rested on her hand, and a tiger-skin rug had been partly drawn over her. She looked up expectantly as I entered, and, as the lamp-light fell upon her face, I could see that she was very pale and thin, with dark hollows

under her eyes. She smiled at me, and pointed to a stool beside her. It was with her left hand that she pointed, and I, running eagerly forward, seized it.—I loathe myself as I think of it,—and pressed it passionately to my lips. Then, seating myself upon the stool, and still retaining her hand, I gave her the photograph which I had brought with me, and talked and talked and talked—of my love for her, of my grief over her illness, of my joy at her recovery, of the misery it was to me to be absent a single evening from her side. She lay quietly looking down at me with imperious eyes and her provocative smile. Once I remember that she passed her hand over my hair as one caresses a dog; and it gave me pleasure—the caress. I thrilled under it. I was her slave, body and soul, and for the moment I rejoiced in my slavery.

And then came the blessed change. Never tell me that there is not a Providence! I was on the brink of perdition. My feet were on the edge. Was it a coincidence that at that very instant help should come? No, no, no; there is a Providence, and its hand has drawn me back. There is something in the universe stronger than this devil woman with her tricks. Ah, what a balm to my heart, it is to think so!

As I looked up at her I was conscious of a change in her. Her face, which had been pale before, was now ghastly. Her eyes were dull, and the lids dropped heavily over them. Above all, the look of serene confidence had gone from her features. Her mouth had weakened. Her forehead had puckered. She was frightened and undecided. And as I watched the change my own spirit fluttered and struggled, trying hard to tear itself from the grip which held it—a grip which, from moment to moment, grew less secure.

“Austin,” she whispered, “I have tried to do too much. I was not strong enough. I have not recovered yet from my illness. But I could not live longer without seeing you. You won’t leave me, Austin? This is only a passing weakness. If you will only give me five minutes, I shall be myself again. Give me the small decanter from the table in the window.”

But I had regained my soul. With her waning strength the influence had cleared away from me and left me free. And I was aggressive—bitterly, fiercely aggressive. For once at least I could make this woman understand what my real feelings toward her were. My soul was filled with a hatred as bestial as the love against which it was a reaction. It was the savage, murderous passion of the revolted serf. I could have taken the crutch from her side and beaten her face in with it. She threw her hands up, as if to avoid a blow, and cowered away from me into the corner of the settee.

“The brandy!” she gasped. “The brandy!”

I took the decanter and poured it over the roots of a palm in the window. Then I snatched the photograph from her hand and tore it into a hundred pieces.

"You vile woman," I said, "if I did my duty to society, you would never leave this room alive!"

"I love you, Austin; I love you!" she wailed.

"Yes," I cried, "and Charles Sadler before. And how many others before that?"

"Charles Sadler!" she gasped. "He has spoken to you? So, Charles Sadler, Charles Sadler!" Her voice came through her white lips like a snake's hiss.

"Yes, I know you, and others shall know you, too. You shameless creature! You knew how I stood. And yet you used your vile power to bring me to your side. You may, perhaps, do so again, but at least you will remember that you have heard me say that I love Miss Marden from the bottom of my soul, and that I loathe you, abhor you! The very sight of you and the sound of your voice fill me with horror and disgust. The thought of you is repulsive. ~~That is how~~ I feel toward you, and if it pleases you by your tricks to draw me again to your side as you have done to-night, you will at least, I should think, have little satisfaction in trying to make a lover out of a man who has told you his real opinion of you. You may put what words you will into my mouth, but you cannot help remembering—"

I stopped, for the woman's head had fallen back, and she had fainted. She could not bear to hear what I had to say to her! What a glow of satisfaction it gives me to think that, come what may, in the future she can never misunderstand my true feelings toward her. But what will occur in the future? What will she do next? I dare not think of it. Oh, if only I could hope that she will leave me alone! But when I think of what I said to her—Never mind; I have been stronger than she for once.

April 11. I hardly slept last night, and found myself in the morning so unstrung and feverish that I was compelled to ask Pratt-Haldane to do my lecture for me. It is the first that I have ever missed. I rose at mid-day, but my head is aching, my hands quivering, and my nerves in a pitiable state.

Who should come round this evening but Wilson. He has just come back from London, where he has lectured, read papers, convened meetings, exposed a medium, conducted a series of experiments on thought transference, entertained Professor Richet of Paris, spent hours gazing into a crystal, and obtained some evidence as to the passage of matter through matter. All this he poured into my ears in a single gust.

"But you!" he cried at last. "You are not looking well. And Miss Penclosa is quite prostrated to-day. How about the experiments?"

"I have abandoned them."

"Tut, tut! Why?"

"The subject seems to me to a dangerous one."

Out came his big brown note-book.

"This is of great interest," said he. "What are your grounds for saying that it is a dangerous one? Please give your facts in chronological order, with approximate dates and names of reliable witnesses with their permanent addresses."

"First of all," I asked, "would you tell me whether you have collected any cases where the mesmerist has gained a command over the subject and has used it for evil purposes?"

"Dozens!" he cried exultantly. "Crime by suggestion--"

"I don't mean suggestion. I mean where a sudden impulse comes from a person at a distance—an uncontrollable impulse."

"Obsession!" he shrieked, in an ecstasy of delight. "It is the rarest condition. We have eight cases, five well attested. You don't mean to say--" His exultation made him hardly articulate.

"No, I don't," said I. "Good-evening! You will excuse me, but I am not very well to-night." And so at last I got rid of him, still brandishing his pencil and his note-book. My troubles may be bad to bear, but at least it is better to hug them to myself than to have myself exhibited by Wilson, like a freak at a fair. He has lost sight of human beings. Every thing to him is a case and a phenomenon. I will die before I speak to him again upon the matter.

April 12. Yesterday was a blessed day of quiet, and I enjoyed an uneventful night. Wilson's presence is a great consolation. What can the woman do now? Surely, when she has heard me say what I have said, she will conceive the same disgust for me which I have for her. She could not, no, she *could* not, desire to have a lover who had insulted her so. No, I believe I am free from her love—but how about her hate? Might she not use these powers of hers for revenge? Tut! why should I frighten myself over shadows? She will forget about me, and I shall forget about her, and all will be well.

April 13. My nerves have quite recovered their tone. I really believe that I have conquered the creature. But I must confess to living in some suspense. She is well again, for I hear that she was driving with Mrs. Wilson in the High Street in the afternoon.

April 14. I do wish I could get away from the place altogether. I shall fly to Agatha's side the very day that the term closes. I suppose it is pitifully weak of me, but this woman gets upon my nerves most terribly. I have seen her again, and I have spoken with her.



I was just after lunch, and I was smoking a cigarette in my study, when I heard the step of my servant Murray in the passage. I was languidly conscious that a second step was audible behind, and had hardly troubled myself to speculate who it might be, when suddenly a slight noise brought me out of my chair with my skin creeping with apprehension. I had never particularly observed before what sort of sound the tapping of a crutch was, but my quivering nerves told me that I heard it now in the sharp wooden clack which alternated with the muffled thud of the foot-fall. Another instant and my servant had shown her in.

I did not attempt the usual conventions of society, nor did she. I simply stood with the smouldering cigarette in my hand, and gazed at her. She in her turn looked silently at me, and at her look I remembered how in these very pages I had tried to define the expression of her eyes, whether they were furtive or fierce. To-day they were fierce—coldly and inexorably so.

"Well," said she at last, "are you still of the same mind as when I saw you last?"

"I have always been of the same mind."

"Let us understand each other, Professor Gilroy," said she slowly. "I am not a very safe person to trifle with, as you should realize by now. It was you who asked me to enter into a series of experiments with you, it was you who won my affections, it was you who professed your love for me, it was you who brought me your own photograph with words of affection upon it, and, finally, it was you who on the very same evening thought fit to insult me most outrageously, addressing me as no man has ever dared to speak to me yet. Tell me that those words came from you in a moment of passion and I am prepared to forget and to forgive them. You did not mean what you said, Austin? You do not really hate me?"

I might have pitied this deformed woman—such a longing for love broke suddenly through the menace of her eyes. But then I thought of what I had gone through, and my heart set like flint.

"If ever you heard me speak of love," said I, "you know very well that it was your voice which spoke, and not mine. The only words of truth which I have ever been able to say to you are those which you heard when last we met."

"I know. Some one has set you against me. It was he!" She tapped with her crutch upon the floor. "Well, you know very well that I could bring you this instant crouching like a spaniel to my feet. You will not find me again in my hour of weakness, when you can insult me with impunity. Have a care what you are doing, Professor Gilroy. You stand in a terrible position. You have not yet realized the hold

which I have upon you."

I shrugged my shoulders and turned away.

"Well," said she, after a pause, "if you despise my love, I must see what can be done with fear. You smile, but the day will come when you will come screaming to me for pardon. Yes, you will grovel on the ground before me, proud as you are, and you will curse the day that ever you turned me from your best friend into your most bitter enemy. Have a care, Professor Gilroy!" I saw a white hand shaking in the air, and a face which was scarcely human, so convulsed was it with passion. An instant later she was gone, and I heard the quick hobble and tap receding down the passage.

But she has left a weight upon my heart. Vague presentiments of coming misfortune lie heavy upon me. I try in vain to persuade myself that these are only words of empty anger. I can remember those relentless eyes too clearly to think so. What shall I do—ah, what shall I do? I am no longer master of my own soul. At any moment this loathsome parasite may creep into me, and then—I must tell some one my hideous secret—I must tell it or go mad. If I had some one to sympathize and advise! Wilson is out of the question. Charles Sadler would understand me only so far as his own experience carries him. Pratt-Haldane! He is a well-balanced man, a man of great common-sense and resource. I will go to him. I will tell him every thing. God grant that he may be able to advise me!

## 4

6.45 p.m. No, it is useless. There is no human help for me; I must fight this out single-handed. Two courses lie before me. I might become this woman's lover. Or I must endure such persecutions as she can inflict upon me. Even if none come, I shall live in a well of apprehension. But she may torture me, she may drive me mad, she may kill me: I will never, never, never give in. What can she inflict which would be worse than the loss of Agatha, and the knowledge that I am a perjured liar, and have forfeited the name of gentleman?

Pratt-Haldane was most amiable, and listened with all politeness to my story. But when I looked at his heavy set features, his slow eyes, and the ponderous study furniture which surrounded him, I could hardly tell him what I had come to say. It was all so substantial, so material. And, besides, what would I myself have said a short

month ago if one of my colleagues had come to me with a story of demonic possession? Perhaps I should have been less patient than he was. As it was, he took notes of my statement, asked me how much tea I drank, how many hours I slept, whether I had been overworking much, had I had sudden pains in the head, evil dreams, singing in the ears, flashes before the eyes—all questions which pointed to his belief that brain congestion was at the bottom of my trouble. Finally he dismissed me with a great many platitudes about open-air exercise, and avoidance of nervous excitement. His prescription, which was for chloral and bromide, I rolled up and threw into the gutter.

No, I can look for no help from any human being. If I consult any more, they may put their heads together and I may find myself in an asylum. I can but grip my courage with both hands, and pray that an honest man may not be abandoned.

April 15. It is the sweetest spring within the memory of man. So green, so mild, so beautiful! Ah, what a contrast between nature without and my own soul so torn with doubt and terror! It has been an uneventful day, but I know that I am on the edge of an abyss. I know it, and yet I go on with the routine of my life. The one bright spot is that Agatha is happy and well and out of all danger. If this creature had a hand on each of us, what might she not do?

April 16. The woman is ingenious in her torments. She knows how fond I am of my work, and how highly my lectures are thought of. So it is from that point that she now attacks me. *It will end, I can see, in my losing my professorship, but I will fight to the finish. She shall not drive me out of it without a struggle.*

I was not conscious of any change during my lecture this morning save that for a minute or two I had a dizziness and swimminess which rapidly passed away. On the contrary, I congratulated myself upon having made my subject (the functions of the red corpuscles) both interesting and clear. I was surprised, therefore, when a student came into my laboratory immediately after the lecture, and complained of being puzzled by the discrepancy between my statements and those in the text-books. He showed me his note-book, in which I was reported as having in one portion of the lecture championed the most outrageous and unscientific heresies. Of course I denied it, and declared that he had misunderstood me, but on comparing his notes with those of his companions, it became clear that he was right, and that I really had made some most preposterous statements. Of course I shall explain it away as being the result of a moment of aberration, but I feel only too sure that it will be the first of a series. It is but a month now to the end of the session, and I pray that I may be able

to hold out until then.

April 26. Ten days have elapsed since I have had the heart to make any entry in my journal. Why should I record my own humiliation and degradation? I had vowed never to open it again. And yet the force of habit is strong, and here I find myself taking up once more the record of my own dreadful experiences—in much the same spirit in which a suicide has been known to take notes of the effects of the poison which killed him.

Well, the crash which I had foreseen has come—and that no further back than yesterday. The university authorities have taken my lectureship from me. It has been done in the most delicate way, purporting to be a temporary measure to relieve me from the effects of overwork, and to give me the opportunity of recovering my health. None the less, it has been done, and I am no longer Professor Gilroy. The laboratory is still in my charge, but I have little doubt that that also will soon go.

The fact is that my lectures had become the laughing-stock of the university. My class was crowded with students who came to see and hear what the eccentric professor would do or say next. I cannot go into the detail of my humiliation. Oh, that devilish woman! There is no depth of buffoonery and imbecility to which she has not forced me. I would begin my lecture clearly and well, but always with the sense of a coming eclipse. Then as I felt the influence I would struggle against it, striving with clenched hands and beads of sweat upon my brow to get the better of it, while the students, hearing my incoherent words and watching my contortions, would roar with laughter at the antics of their professor. And then, when she had once fairly mastered me, out would come the most outrageous things—silly jokes, sentiments as though I were proposing a toast, snatches of ballads, personal abuse even against some member of my class. And then in a moment my brain would clear again, and my lecture would proceed decorously to the end. No wonder that my conduct has been the talk of the colleges. No wonder that the University Senate has been compelled to take official notice of such a scandal. Oh, that devilish woman!

And the most dreadful part of it all is my own loneliness. Here I sit in a commonplace English bow-window, looking out upon a commonplace English street with its garish 'buses and its lounging policeman, and behind me there hangs a shadow which is out of all keeping with the age and place. In the home of knowledge I am weighed down and tortured by a power of which science knows nothing. No magistrate would listen to me. No paper would discuss my case. No doctor would believe my symptoms. My own most

would only look upon it as a sign of brain derangement. I am out of all touch with my kind. Oh, that devilish woman! Let her have a care! She may push me too far. When the law cannot help a man, he may make a law for himself.

She met me in the High Street yesterday evening and spoke to me. It was as well for her, perhaps, that it was not between the hedges of a lonely country road. She asked me with her cold smile whether I had been chastened yet. I did not deign to answer her. "We must try another turn of the screw," said she. Have a care, my lady, have a care! I had her at my mercy once. Perhaps another chance may come.

April 28. The suspension of my lectureship has had the effect also of taking away her means of annoying me, and so I have enjoyed two blessed days of peace. After all, there is no reason to despair. Sympathy pours in to me from all sides, and every one agrees that it is my devotion to science and the arduous nature of my researches which have shaken my nervous system. I have had the kindest message from the council advising me to travel abroad, and expressing the confident hope that I may be able to resume all my duties by the beginning of the summer term. Nothing could be more flattering than their allusions to my career and to my services to the university. It is only in misfortune that one can test one's own popularity. This creature may weary of tormenting me, and then all may yet be well. May God grant it!

April 29. Our sleepy little town has had a small sensation. The only knowledge of crime which we ever have is when a rowdy undergraduate breaks a few lamps or comes to blows with a policeman. Last night, however, there was an attempt made to break into the branch of the Bank of England, and we are all in a flutter in consequence. Parkenson, the manager, is an intimate friend of mine, and I found him very much excited when I walked round there after breakfast. Had the thieves broken into the counting-house, they would still have had the safes to reckon with, so that the defence was considerably stronger than the attack. Indeed, the latter does not appear to have ever been very formidable. Two of the lower windows have marks as if a chisel or some such instrument had been pushed under them to force them open. The police should have a good clue, for the wood-work had been done with green paint only the day before, and from the smears it is evident that some of it has found its way on to the criminal's hands or clothes.

4.30 P.M. Ah, that accursed woman! That thrice accursed woman! Never mind! She shall not beat me! No, she shall not! But, oh, the she-devil! She has taken my professorship. Now she would take my honor. Is there nothing I can do against her, nothing save—Ah, but,

hard pushed as I am, I cannot bring myself to think of that!

It was about an hour ago that I went into my bedroom, and was brushing my hair before the glass, when suddenly my eyes lit upon something which left me so sick and cold that I sat down upon the edge of the bed and began to cry. It is many a long year since I shed tears, but all my nerve was gone, and I could but sob and sob in impotent grief and anger. There was my house jacket, the coat I usually wear after dinner, hanging on its peg by the wardrobe, with the right sleeve thickly crusted from wrist to elbow with daubs of green paint.

So this was what she meant by another turn of the screw! She had made a public imbecile of me. Now she would brand me as a criminal. This time she has failed. But how about the next? I dare not think of it—and of Agatha and my poor old mother! I wish that I were dead!

Yes, this is the other turn of the screw. And this is also what she meant, no doubt, when she said that I had not realized yet the power she has over me. I look back at my account of my conversation with her, and I see how she declared that with a slight exertion of her will her subject would be conscious, and with a stronger one unconscious. Last night I was unconscious. I could have sworn that I slept soundly in my bed without so much as a dream. And yet those stains tell me that I dressed, made my way out, attempted to open the bank windows, and returned. Was I observed? Is it possible that some one saw me do it and followed me home? Ah, what a hell my life has become! I have no peace, no rest. But my patience is nearing its end.

10 P.M. I have cleaned my coat with turpentine. I do not think that any one could have seen me. It was with my screw-driver that I made the marks. I found it all crusted with paint, and I have cleaned it. My head aches as if it would burst, and I have taken five grains of antipyrine. If it were not for Agatha, I should have taken fifty and had an end of it.

May 3. Three quiet days. This hell fiend is like a cat with a mouse. She lets me loose only to pounce upon me again. I am never so frightened as when every thing is still. My physical state is deplorable—perpetual hiccough and ptosis of the left eyelid.

I have heard from the Mardens that they will be back the day after tomorrow. I do not know whether I am glad or sorry. They were safe in London. Once here they may be drawn into the miserable network in which I am myself struggling. And I must tell them of it. I cannot marry Agatha so long as I know that I am not responsible for my own actions. Yes, I must tell them, even if it brings every thing to an end between us.

To-night is the university ball, and I must go. God knows I never

felt less in the humor for festivity, but I must not have it said that I am unfit to appear in public. If I am seen there, and have speech with some of the elders of the university it will go a long way toward showing them that it would be unjust to take my chair away from me.

11.30 P.M. I have been to the ball. Charles Sadler and I went together, but I have come away before him. I shall wait up for him, however, for, indeed, I fear to go to sleep these nights. He is a cheery, practical fellow, and a chat with him will steady my nerves. On the whole, the evening was a great success. I talked to every one who has influence, and I think that I made them realize that my chair is not vacant quite yet. The creature was at the ball—unable to dance, of course, but sitting with Mrs. Wilson. Again and again her eyes rested upon me. They were almost the last things I saw before I left the room. Once, as I sat sideways to her, I watched her, and saw that her gaze was following some one else. It was Sadler, who was dancing at the time with the second Miss Thurston. To judge by her expression, it is well for him that he is not in her grip as I am. He does not know the escape he has had. I think I hear his step in the street now, and I will go down and let him in. If he will--

May 4. Why did I break off in this way last night? I never went down stairs, after all—at least, I have no recollection of doing so. But, on the other hand, I cannot remember going to bed. one of my hands is greatly swollen this morning, and yet I have no remembrance of injuring it yesterday. Otherwise, I am feeling all the better for last night's festivity. But I cannot understand how it is that I did not meet Charles Sadler when I so fully intended to do so. Is it possible—My God, it is only too probable! Has she been leading me some devil's dance again? I will go down to Sadler and ask him.

Mid-day. The thing has come to a crisis. My life is not worth living. But, if I am to die, then she shall come also. I will not leave her behind, to drive some other man mad as she has me. No, I have come to the limit of my endurance. She has made me as desperate and dangerous a man as walks the earth. God knows I have never had the heart to hurt a fly, and yet, if I had my hands now upon that woman, she should never leave this room alive. I shall see her this very day, and she shall learn what she has to expect from me.

I went to Sadler and found him, to my surprise, in bed. As I entered he sat up and turned a face toward me which sickened me as I looked at it.

"Why, Sadler, what has happened?" I cried, but my heart turned cold as I said it.

"Gilroy," he answered, mumbling with his swollen lips, 'I have for some weeks been under the impression that you are a madman.

Now I know it, and that you are a dangerous one as well. If it were not that I am unwilling to make a scandal in the college, you would now be in the hands of the police."

"Do you mean—" I cried.

"I mean that as I opened the door last night you rushed out upon me, struck me with both your fists in the face, knocked me down, kicked me furiously in the side, and left me lying almost unconscious in the street. Look at your own hand bearing witness against you"

Yes, there it was, puffed up, with sponge-like knuckles, as after some terrific blow. What could I do? Though he put me down as a madman, I must tell him all. I sat by his bed and went over all my troubles from the beginning. I poured them out with quivering hands and burning words which might have carried conviction to the most sceptical. "She hates you and she hates me!" I cried. "She revenged herself last night on both of us at once. She saw me leave the ball, and she must have seen you also. She knew how long it would take you to reach home. Then she had but to use her wicked will. Ah, your bruised face is a small thing beside by bruised soul!"

He was struck by my story. That was evident. "Yes, yes, she watched me out of the room," he muttered. "She is capable of it. But is it possible that she has really reduced you to this? What do you intend to do?"

"To stop it!" I cried. "I am perfectly desperate; I shall give her fair warning to-day, and the next time will be the last."

"Do nothing rash," said he.

"Rash!" I cried. "The only rash thing is that I should postpone it another hour." With that I rushed to my room, and here I am on the eve of what may be the great crisis of my life. I shall start at once. I have gained one thing today, for I have made one man, at least, realize the truth of this monstrous experience of mine. And, if the worst should happen, this diary remains as a proof of the goad that has driven me.

Evening. When I came to Wilson's, I was shown up, and found that he was sitting with Miss Penclosa. For half an hour I had to endure his fussy talk about his recent research into the exact nature of the spiritualistic rap, while the creature and I sat in silence looking across the room at each other. I read a sinister amusement in her eyes, and she must have seen hatred and menace in mine. I had almost despaired of having speech with her when he was called from the room, and we were left for a few moments together.

"Well, Professor Gilroy—or is it Mr. Gilroy?" said she, with that bitter smile of hers. "How is your friend Mr. Charles Sadler after the ball?"



"You fiend!" I cried. "You have come to the end of your tricks now. I will have no more of them. Listen to what I say." I strode across and shook her roughly by the shoulder. "As sure as there is a God in heaven, I swear that if you try another of your deviltries upon me, I will have your life for it. Come what may, I will have your life. I have come to the end of what a man can endure."

"Accounts are not quite settled between us," said she, with a passion that equalled my own. "I can love, and I can hate. You had your choice. You chose to spurn the first; now you must test the other. It will take a little more to break your spirit, I see, but broken it shall be. Miss Marden comes back to-morrow, as I understand,"

"What has that to do with you?" I cried. "It is a pollution that you should dare even to think of her. If I thought that you would harm her—"

She was frightened, I could see, though she tried to brazen it out. She read the black thought in my mind, and cowered away from me.

"She is fortunate in having such a champion," said she. "He actually dares to threaten a lonely woman. I must really congratulate Miss Marden upon her protector."

The words were bitter, but the voice and manner were more acid still.

"There is no use talking," said I. "I only came here to tell you,—and to tell you most solemnly,—that your next outrage upon me will be your last." With that, as I heard Wilson's step upon the stair, I walked from the room. Ay, she may look venomous and deadly, but, for all that, she is beginning to see now that she has as much to fear from me as I can have from her. Murder! It has an ugly sound. But you don't talk of murdering a snake or of murdering a tiger. Let her have a care now.

May 5. I met Agatha and her mother at the station at eleven o'clock. She is looking so bright, so happy, so beautiful. And she was so overjoyed to see me. What have I done to deserve such love? I went back home with them, and we lunched together. All the troubles seem in a moment to have been shredded back from my life. She tells me that I am looking pale and worried and ill. The dear child puts it down to my loneliness and the perfunctory attentions of a housekeeper. I pray that she may never know the truth! May the shadow, if shadow there must be, lie ever black across my life and leave hers in the sunshine. I have just come back from them, feeling a new man. With her by my side I think that I could show a bold face to any thing which life might send.

5 P.M. Now, let me try to be accurate. Let me try to say exactly how it occurred. It is fresh in my mind, and I can set it down cor-

rectly, though it is not likely that the time will ever come when I shall forget the doings of to-day.

I had returned from the Mardens' after lunch, and was cutting some microscopic sections in my freezing microtome, when in an instant I lost consciousness in the sudden hateful fashion which has become only too familiar to me of late.

When my senses came back to me I was sitting in a small chamber, very different from the one in which I had been working. It was cosy and bright, with chintz-covered settees, colored hangings, and a thousand pretty little trifles upon the wall. A small ornamental clock ticked in front of me, and the hands pointed to half-past three. It was all quite familiar to me, and yet I stared about for a moment in a half-dazed way until my eyes fell upon a cabinet photograph of myself upon the top of the piano. On the other side stood one of Mrs. Marden. Then, of course, I remembered where I was. It was Agatha's boudoir.

But how came I there, and what did I want? A horrible sinking came to my heart. Had I been sent here on some devilish errand? Had that errand already been done? Surely it must; otherwise, why should I be allowed to come back to consciousness? Oh, the agony of that moment! What had I done? I sprang to my feet in my despair, and as I did so a small glass bottle fell from my knees onto the the carpet.

It was unbroken, and I picked it up. Outside was written "Sulphuric Acid. Fort." When I drew the round glass stopper, a thick fume rose slowly up, and a pungent, choking smell pervaded the room. I recognized it as one which I kept for chemical testing in my chambers. But why had I brought a bottle of vitriol into Agatha's chamber? Was it not this thick, reeking liquid with which jealous women had been known to mar the beauty of their rivals? My heart stood still as I held the bottle to the light. Thank God, it was full! No mischief had been done as yet. But had Agatha come in a minute sooner, was it not certain that the hellish parasite within me would have dashed the stuff into her—Ah, it will not bear to be thought of! But it must have been for that. Why else should I have brought it? At the thought of what I might have done my worn nerves broke down, and I sat shivering and twitching, the pitiable wreck of a man.

It was the sound of Agatha's voice and the rustle of her dress which restored me. I looked up, and saw her blue eyes, so full of tenderness and pity, gazing down at me.

"We must take you away to the country, Austin," she said. "You want rest and quiet. You look wretchedly ill."

"Oh, it is nothing!" said I, trying to smile. "It was only a momen-

tary weakness. I am all right again now."

"I am so sorry to keep you waiting. Poor boy, you must have been here quite half an hour! The vicar was in the drawing-room, and, as I knew that you did not care for him, I thought it better that Jane should show you up here. I thought the man would never go!"

"Thank God he stayed! Thank God he stayed!" I cried hysterically.

"Why, what is the matter with you, Austin?" she asked, holding my arm as I staggered up from the chair. "Why are you glad that the vicar stayed? And what is this little bottle in your hand?"

"Nothing," I cried, thrusting it into my pocket. "But I must go. I have something important to do."

"How stern you look, Austin! I have never seen your face like that. You are angry?"

"Yes, I am angry."

"But not with me?"

"No, no, my darling! You would not understand."

"But you have not told me why you came."

"I came to ask you whether you would always love me—no matter what I did, or what shadow might fall on my name. Would you believe in me and trust me however black appearances might be against me?"

"You know that I would, Austin."

"Yes, I know that you would. What I do I shall do for you. I am driven to it. There is no other way out, my darling!" I kissed her and rushed from the room.

The time for indecision was at an end. As long as the creature threatened my own prospects and my honor there might be a question as to what I should do. But now, when Agatha—my innocent Agatha—was endangered, my duty lay before me like a turnpike road. I had no weapon, but I never paused for that. What weapon should I need, when I felt every muscle quivering with the strength of a frenzied man? I ran through the streets, so set upon what I had to do that I was only dimly conscious of the faces of friends whom I met—dimly conscious also that Professor Wilson met me, running with equal precipitance in the opposite direction. Breathless but resolute I reached the house and rang the bell. A white-cheeked maid opened the door, and turned whiter yet when she saw the face that looked in at her.

"Show me up at once to Miss Penclosa," I demanded.

"Sir," she gasped, "Miss Penclosa died this afternoon at half-past three!"



## RUSSELL KIRK

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### There's a Long, Long Trail A-Winding

*Although an American author Russell Kirk (b.1918) writes stories in the English tradition of ghostly tales. For many years the professor of history at Michigan State College, he was regarded as America's leading expert of conservative political theory owing to his book The Conservative Mind(1953). His ventures into weird fiction have only been occasional but are always welcome. There have been a handful of Gothic novels: Old House of Fear(1961), A Creature of the Twilight(1966) and Lord of the Hollow Dark(1979), but his best work is in his two collections of stories, The Surley Sullen Bell(1962; later reprinted as Lost Lake, 1964) and The Princess of All Lands(1979). The second volume included 'There's a Long, Long Trail A-Winding' (1976) which went on to win the World Fantasy Award for that year's Best Short Fiction.*

*Then he said unto the disciples, it is impossible but that offenses will come; but woe unto him, through whom they come!*

*It were better for him that a millstone were hanged about his neck, and he cast into the sea, than that he should offend one of these little ones.*

*-Luke xvii: 1,2*

Along the vast empty six-lane highway, the blizzard swept as if it meant to swallow all the sensual world. Frank Sarsfield, massive though he was, scudded like a heavy kite before that overwhelming wind. On his thick white hair the snow clotted and tried to form a cap; the big flakes so swirled round his Viking face that he scarcely could make out the barren country on either side of the road.

Somehow he must get indoors. Racing for sanctuary, the last automobile had swept unheeding past his thumb two hours ago, bound doubtless for the county town some twenty miles eastward. Westward, among the hills, the highway must be blocked by snowdrifts now. This was an unkind twelfth of January. "Blow, blow, thou Winter wind!" Twilight being almost upon him, soon he must find lodging or else freeze stiff by the roadside.

He had walked more than thirty miles that day. Having in his pocket the sum of twenty-nine dollars and thirty cents, he could have put up at either of the two motels he had passed, had they not been closed for the winter. Well, as always, he was decently dressed—a good wash-and-wear suit and a neat black overcoat. As always, he was shaven and clean and civil-spoken. Surely some farmer or villager would take him in, if he knocked with a ten-dollar bill in his fist. People sometimes mistook him for a stranded well-to-do motorist, and sometimes he took the trouble to undeceive them.

But where to apply? This was depopulated country, its forests gone to the sawmills long before, its mines worked out. The freeway ran through the abomination of desolation. He did not prefer to walk the freeways, but on such a day as this there were no cars on the lesser roads.

He had run away from a hardscrabble New Hampshire farm when he was fourteen, and ever since then, except for brief working intervals, he had been either on the roads or in the jails. Now his sixtieth birthday was imminent. There were few men bigger than Frank Sarsfield, and none more solitary. Where was a friendly house?

For a few moments the rage of the snow slackened; he stared about.

Away to the left, almost a mile distant, he made out a grim high clump of buildings on rising ground, a wall enclosing them; the roof of the central building was gone. Sarsfield grinned, knowing what that complex must be: a derelict prison. He had lodged in prisons altogether too many nights.

His hand sheltering his eyes from the north wind, he looked to his left. Down in a snug valley, beside a narrow river and broad marshes, he could perceive a village or hamlet: a white church tower, three or four commercial buildings, some little houses, beyond them a park of bare maple trees. The old highway must have run through or near this forgotten place, but the new freeway had sealed it off. There was no sign of a freeway exit to the settlement; probably it could be reached by car only along some detouring country lane. In such a little decayed town there would be folk willing to accept him for the sake of his proffered ten dollars-or, better, simply for charity's sake and talk with an amusing stranger who could recite every kind of poetry.

He scrambled heavily down the embankment. At this point, praise be, no tremendous wire fence kept the haughty new highway inviolable. His powerful thighs took him through the swelling drifts, though his heart pounded as the storm burst upon him afresh.

The village was more distant than he had thought. He passed panting through old fields half grown up to poplar and birch. A little to the west he noticed what seemed to be old mine workings, with fragments of brick buildings. He clambered upon an old railroad bed, its rails and ties taken up; perhaps the new freeway had dealt the final blow to the rails. Here the going was somewhat easier.

Mingled with the wind's shriek, did he hear a church bell now? Could they be holding services at the village in this weather? Presently he came to a burnt-out little railway depot, on its platform signboard still the name "Anthonyville." Now he walked on a street of sorts, but no car tracks or footprints sully the snow.

Anthonyville Free Methodist Church hulked before him. Indeed the bell was swinging, and now and again faintly ringing in the steeple; but it was the wind's mockery, a knell for the derelict town of Anthonyville. The church door was slamming in the high wind, flying open again, and slamming once more, like a perpetual-motion machine, the glass being gone from the church windows. Sarsfield trudged past the skeletal church.

The front of Emmons' General Store was boarded up, and so was the front of what may have been a drugstore. The village hall was a wreck. The school may have stood upon those scanty foundations which protruded from the snow. And from no chimney of the decrepit

cottages and cabins along Main Street—the only street—did any smoke rise.

Sarsfield never had seen a deader village. In an upper window of what looked like a livery stable converted into a garage, a faded cardboard sign could be read:

REMEMBER YOUR FUTURE  
BACK THE TOWNSEND PLAN

Was no one at all left here, not even some gaunt old couple managing on Social Security? He might force his way into one of the stores or cottages—though on principle and prudence he generally steered clear of possible charges of breaking and entering—but that would be cold comfort. In poor Anthonyville there must remain some living soul.

His mittened hands clutching his red ears, Sarsfield had plodded nearly to the end of Main Street. Anthonyville was Endsville, he saw now: river and swamp and new highway cut it off altogether from the rest of the frozen world, except for the drift-obliterated country road that twisted southward, Lord knew whither. He might count himself lucky to find a stove, left behind in some shack, that he could feed with boards ripped from walls.

Main Street ended at that grove or park of old maples. Just a sugar-bush, like those he had tapped in his boy-hood under his father's rough command? No: had the trees not been leafless, he might not have discerned the big stone house among the trees, the only substantial building remaining to Anthonyville. But see it he did for one moment, before the blizzard veiled it from him. There were stone gateposts, too, and a bronze tablet set into one of them. Sarsfield brushed the snowflakes from the inscription: "Tamarack House."

Stumbling among the maples toward this promise, he almost collided with a tall glacial boulder. A similar boulder rose a few feet to his right, the pair of them halfway between gateposts and house. There was a bronze tablet on this boulder, too, and he paused to read it:

Sacred to the memory of  
JEROME ANTHONY  
July 4, 1836–January 14, 1915  
Brigadier-General in the Corps of Engineers,  
Army of the Republic founder of this town  
architect of Anthonyville State Prison  
who died as he had lived, with honor



“And there will I keep you forever,  
Yes, forever and a day, Yes, forever and a day,  
Till the wall shall crumble in ruin,  
And moulder in dust away.”

There's an epitaph for a prison architect, Sarsfield thought. It was too bitter an evening for inspecting the other boulder, and he hurried toward the portico of Tamarack House. This was a very big house indeed, a bracketed house, built all of squared fieldstone with beautiful glints to the masonry. A cupola topped it.

Once, come out of the cold into a public library, Sarsfield had pored through a picture book about American architectural styles. There was a word for this sort of house. Was it “Italianate”? Yes, it rose in his memory—he took pride in no quality except his power of recollection. Yes, that was the word. Had he visited this house before? He could not account for a vague familiarity. Perhaps there had been a photograph of this particular house in that library book.

Every window was heavily shuttered, and no smoke rose from any of the several chimneys. Sarsfield went up the stone steps to confront the oaken front door.

It was a formidable door, but it seemed as if at some time it had been broken open, for long ago a square of oak with a different grain had been mortised into the area round lock and keyhole. There was a gigantic knocker with a strange face worked upon it. Sarsfield knocked repeatedly.

No one answered. Conceivably the storm might have made his pounding inaudible to any occupants, but who could spend the winter in a shuttered house without fires? Another bronze plaque was screwed to the door:

TAMARACK HOUSE  
Property of the Anthony Family Trust  
Guarded by Protective Service

Sarsfield doubted the veracity of the last line. He made his way round to the back. No one answered those back doors, either, and they too were locked.

But presently he found what he had hoped for: an oldfangled slanting cellar door, set into the foundations. It was not wise to enter without permission, but at least he might accomplish it without breaking. His fingers, though clumsy, were strong as the rest of him. After much trouble and with help from the Boy Scout knife that he carried, he pulled the pins out of the cellar door's three hinges and

scrambled down into the darkness. With the passing of the years, he had become something of a jailhouse lawyer—though those young inmates bored him with their endless chatter about Miranda and Escobedo. And now he thought of the doctrine called “defense of necessity.” If caught, he could say that self-preservation from freezing is the first necessity; besides, they might not take him for a bum.

Faint light down the cellar steps—he would replace the hinge-pins later—showed him an inner door at the foot. That door was hooked, though hooked only. With a sigh, Sarsfield put his shoulder to the door; the hook clattered to the stone floor inside; and he was master of all he surveyed.

In that black cellar he found no light switch. Though he never smoked, he carried matches for such emergencies. Having lit one, he discovered a providential kerosene lamp on a table, with enough kerosene still in it. Sarsfield went lamp-lit through the cellars and up more stone stairs into a pantry. “Anybody home?” he called. It was an eerie echo.

He would make sure before exploring, for he dreaded shotguns. How about a cheerful song? In that chill pantry, Sarsfield bellowed a tune formerly beloved at Rotary Clubs. Once a waggish Rotarian, after half an hour’s talk with the hobo extraordinary, had taken him to Rotary for lunch and commanded him to tell tales of the road and to sing the members a song. Frank Sarsfield’s untutored voice was loud enough when he wanted it to be, and he sang the song he had sung to the Rotary:

*“There’s a long, long trail a-winding into the land  
of my dreams,  
Where the nightingales are singing and the white  
moon beams;  
There’s a long, long night of waiting until my  
dreams all come true,  
Till the day when I’ll be going down that long,  
long trail with you!”*

No response: no cry, no footstep, not a rustle. Even in so big a house, they couldn’t have failed to hear his song, sung in a voice fit to wake the dead. Father O’Malley had called Frank’s voice “sten-torian”—a good word, though he was not just sure what it meant. He liked that last tune, though he’d no one to walk to; he’d repeat it:

*“Till the day when I’ll be going down that long,  
long trail with you!”*

It was all right. Sarsfield went into the dining room, where he found a splendid long walnut table, chairs with embroidered seats, a fine sideboard and china cabinet, and a high Venetian chandelier. The china was in that cabinet, and the silverware was in that sideboard. But in no room of Tamarack House was any living soul.

Sprawled in a big chair before the fireplace in the Sunday parlor, Sarsfield took the chill out of his bones. The woodshed, connected with the main house by a passage from the kitchen, was half-filled with logs—not first-rate fuel, true, for they had been stacked there three or four years ago, to judge by the fungi upon them, but burnable after he had collected old newspapers and chopped kindling. He had crisscrossed elm and birch to make a noble fire.

It was not very risky to let white wood-smoke eddy from the chimneys, for it would blend with the driving snow and the blast would dissipate it at once. Besides, Anthonyville's population was zero. From the cupola atop the house, in another lull of the blizzard, he had looked over the icy countryside and had seen no inhabited farmhouse up the forgotten dirt road—which, anyway, was hopelessly blocked by drifts today. There was no approach for vehicles from the freeway, while river and marsh protected the rear. He speculated that Tamarack House might be inhabited summers, though not in any very recent summer. The "Protective Service" probably consisted of a farmer who made a fortnightly inspection in fair weather.

It was good to hole up in a remote county where burglars seemed unknown as yet. Frank Sarsfield restricted his own depredations to church poor-boxes (Catholic, preferably, he being no Protestant), and then only under the defense of necessity, after a run of unsuccessful mendicancy. He feared and detested strong thieves, so numerous nowadays; to avoid them and worse than thieves he steered clear of the cities, roving to little places which still kept crime in the family, where it belonged.

He had dined, and then washed the dishes dutifully. The kitchen wood-range still functioned, and so did the hard-water and soft-water hand pumps in the scullery. As for food, there was enough to feed a good-sized prison: the shelves of the deep cellar cold-room threatened to collapse under the weight of glass jars full of jams, jellies, preserved peaches, apricots, applesauce, pickled trout, and many more good things, all redolent of his New England youth. Most of the jars had neat paper labels, all giving the year of canning, some the name of the canner; on the front shelves, the most recent date he had found was 1968, on a little pot of strawberry jam, and below it was the name

"Allegra" in a feminine hand.

Everything in this house lay in apple pie order—though Sarsfield wondered how long the plaster would keep from cracking, with Tamarack House unheated in winter. He felt positively virtuous for lighting fires, one here in the Sunday parlor, another in the little antique iron stove in the bedroom he had chosen for himself at the top of the house.

He had poked into every handsome room of Tamarack House, with the intense pleasure of a small boy who had found his way into an enchanted castle. Every room was satisfying, well furnished (he was warming by the fire two sheets from the linen closet, for his bed), and wondrously oldfashioned. There was no electric light, no central heating, no bathroom; there was an indoor privy at the back of the woodshed, but no running water unless one counted the hand-pumps. There was an oldfangled wall telephone: Frank tried, greatly daring, for the operator, but it was dead. He had found a crystal-set radio that didn't work. This was an old lady's house, surely, and the old lady hadn't visited it for some years, but perhaps her relatives kept it in order as a "holiday home" or in hope of selling it—at ruined Anthonyville, a forlorn hope. He had discovered two canisters of tea, a jar full of coffee beans, and ten gallons of kerosene. How thoughtful!

Perhaps the old lady was dead, buried under that other boulder among the maples in front of the house. Perhaps she had been the General's daughter—but no, not if the General had been born in 1836. Why those graves in the lawn? Sarsfield had heard of farm families near medical schools who, in the old days, had buried their dead by the house for fear of body snatchers; but that couldn't apply at Anthonyville. Well, there were family graveyards, but this must be one of the smallest.

The old General who built this house had died on January 14. Day after tomorrow, January 14 would come round again, and it would be Frank Sarsfield's sixtieth birthday. "I drink your health in water, General," Sarsfield said aloud, raising his cut-glass goblet taken from the china cabinet. There was no strong drink in the house, but that didn't distress Sarsfield, for he never touched it. His mother had warned him against it—and sure enough, the one time he had drunk a good deal of wine, when he was new to the road, he had got sick. "Thanks, General, for your hospitality."

Nobody responded to his toast.

His mother had been a saint, the neighbors had said, and his father a drunken devil. He had seen neither of them after he ran away. He had missed his mother's funeral because he hadn't known of her death until months after; he had missed his father's, long later, because

he chose to miss it, though that omission cost him sleepless nights now. Sarsfield slept poorly at best. Almost always there were nightmares.

Yet perhaps he would sleep well enough tonight in that little garret room near the cupola. He had found that several of the bedrooms in Tamarack House had little metal plates over their doorways. There were "The General's Room" and "Father's Room" and "Mama's Room" and "Alice's Room" and "Allegra's Room" and "Edith's Room." By a happy coincidence, the little room at the top of the back stair, on the garret floor of the house, was labeled "Frank's Room." But he'd not chosen it for that only. At the top of the house, one was safer from sheriffs or burglars. And through the skylight—there was only a frieze window—a man could get to the roof of the main block. From that roof one could descend to the woodshed roof by a fire-escape of iron rungs fixed in the stone outer wall; and from the woodshed it was an easy drop to the ground. After that, the chief difficulty would be to run down Main Street and then get across the freeway without being detected, while people searched the house for you. Talk of Goldilocks and the Three Bears! Much experience had taught Sarsfield such forethought.

Had that other Frank, so commemorated over the bedroom door, been a son or a servant? Presumably a son—though Sarsfield had found no pictures of boys in the old velvet-covered album in the Sunday parlor, nor any of manservants. There were many pictures of the General, a little rooster-like man with a beard; and of Father, portly and pleasant-faced; and of Mama, elegant; and of three small girls who must be Alice and Allegra and Edith. He had liked especially the photographs of Allegra, since he had tasted her strawberry jam. All the girls were pretty, but Allegra—who must have been about seven in most of the pictures—was really charming, with long ringlets and kind eyes and a delicate mouth that curved upward at its corners.

Sarsfield adored little girls and distrusted big girls. His mother had cautioned him against bad women, so he had kept away from such. Because he liked peace, he had never married—not that he could have married anyway, because that would have tied him to one place, and he was too clumsy to earn money at practically anything except dishwashing for summer hotels. Not marrying had meant that he could have no little daughters like Allegra.

Sometimes he had puzzled the prison psychiatrists. In prison it was well to play stupid. He had refrained cunningly from reciting poetry to the psychiatrists. So after testing Sarsfield they wrote him down as "dull normal" and he was assigned to labor as a "gardener"—which meant going round the prison yards picking up trash by a stick with

a nail in the end of it. That was easy work, and he detested hard work. Yet when there was truly heavy work to be done in prison, sometimes he would come forward to shovel tons of coal or carry hods of brick or lift big blocks into place. That, too, was his cunning: it impressed the other jailbirds with his enormous strength, so that the gangs left him alone.

"Yes, you're a loner, Frank Sarsfield," he said to himself aloud. He looked at himself in that splendid Sunday-parlor mirror, which stretched from floor to ceiling. He saw a man overweight but lean enough of face, standing six feet six, built like a bear, a strong nose, some teeth missing, a strong chin, and rather wild light blue eyes. He was an uncommon sort of bum. Deliberately he looked at his image out of the corners of his eyes, as was his way, because he was non-violent, and eye contact might mean trouble.

"You look like a Viking, Frank," old Father O'Malley had told him once, "but you ought to have been a monk."

"Oh, Father," he had answered, "I'm too much of a fool for a monk."

"Well," said Father O'Malley, "you're no more fool than many a brother, and you're celibate and continent, I take it. Yet it's late for that now. Look out you don't turn berserker, Frank. Go to confession sometime, to a priest that doesn't know you, if you'll not go to me. If you'd confess, you'd not be haunted."

But he seldom went to mass, and never to confession. All those church boxes pilfered, his mother and father abandoned, his sister neglected, all the ghastly humbling of himself before policemen, all the horror and shame of the prisons! There could be no grace for him now. "*There's a long, long trail a-winding into the land of my dreams . . .*" What dreams! He had looked up "berserker" in Webster. But he wouldn't ever do that sort of thing. A man had to keep a control upon himself; besides, he was a coward, and he loved peace.

Nearly all the other prisoners had been brutes, guilty as sin, guilty as Miranda or Escobedo. Once, sentenced for rifling a church safe, he had been put into the same cell with a man who had murdered his wife by taking off her head. The head never had been found. Sarsfield had dreamed of that head in such short intervals of sleep as he had enjoyed while the wife-killer was his cellmate. Nearly all night, every night, he had lain awake surreptitiously watching the murderer in the opposite bunk and feeling his own neck now and again. He had been surprised and pleased when eventually the wife-killer had gone hysterical and obtained assignment to another cell. The murderer had told the guards that he just couldn't stand being watched all night by that terrible giant who never talked.

Only one of the prison psychiatrists had been pleasant or bright, and that had been the old doctor born in Vienna who went round from penitentiary to penitentiary checking on the psychiatric staffs. The old doctor had taken a liking to him, and had written a report to accompany Frank's petition for parole. Three months later, in a parole office, the parole officer had gone out hurriedly for a quarter of an hour, and Sarsfield had taken the chance to read his own file that the parole man had left in a folder on his desk.

"Francis Sarsfield has a memory that almost can be described as photographic"—so had run one line in the Vienna doctor's report. When he read that, Sarsfield had known that the doctor was clever doctor. "He suffers chiefly from an arrest of emotional development, and may be regarded as a rather bright small boy in some respects. His three temporarily successful escapes from prison suggest that his intelligence has been much under-rated. On at least one of those occasions he could have eluded the arresting officer had he been willing to resort to violence. Sarsfield repeatedly describes himself as non-violent and has no record of aggression while confined, nor in connection with any of the offenses for which he was arrested. On the contrary, he seems timid and withdrawn, and might become a victim of assaults in prison, were it not for his size, strength, and power of voice."

Sarsfield had been pleased enough by that paragraph, but a little puzzled by what followed:

"In general, Sarsfield is one of those recidivists who ought not to be confined, were any alternative method now available for restraining them from petty offenses against property. Not only does he lack belligerence against men, but apparently he is quite clean of any record against women and children. It seems that he does not indulge in autoeroticism, either—perhaps because of strict instruction by his R. C. mother during his formative years.

"I add, however, that conceivably Sarsfield is not fundamentally so gentle as his record indicates. He can be energetic in self-defense when pushed to the wall. In his youth occasionally he was induced, for the promise of \$5 or \$10, to stand up as an amateur against some traveling professional boxer. He admits that he did not fight hard, and cried when he was badly beaten. Nevertheless, I am inclined to suspect a potentiality for violence, long repressed but not totally extinguished by years of 'humbling himself,' in his phrase. This possibility is not so certain as to warrant additional detention, even though three years of Sarsfield's sentence remain unexpired."

Yes, he had memorized nearly the whole of that old doctor's analysis, which had got his parole for him. There had been the con-



cluding paragraphs:

"Francis Sarsfield is oppressed by a haunting sense of personal guilt. He is religious to the point of superstition, an R.C., and appears to believe himself damned. Although worldly-wise in a number of respects, he retains an almost unique innocence in others. His frequent humor and candor account for his success, much of the time, at begging. He has read much during his wanderings and terms of confinement. He has a strong taste for good poetry of the popular sort, and has accumulated a mass of miscellaneous information, much of it irrelevant to the life he leads.

"Although occasionally moody and even surly, most of the time he subjects himself to authority, and will work fairly well if closely supervised. He possesses no skills of any sort, unless some knack for woodchopping, acquired while he was enrolled in the Civilian Conservation Corps, can be considered a marketable skill. He appears to be incorrigibly footloose, and therefore confinement is more unpleasant to him than to most prisoners. It is truly remarkable that he continues to be rational enough, his isolation and heavy guilt-complex considered.

"Sometimes evasive when he does not desire to answer questions, nevertheless he rarely utters a direct lie. His personal modesty may be described as excessive. His habits of cleanliness are commendable, if perhaps of origins like Lady Macbeth's.

"Despite his strength, he is a diabetic and suffers from a heart murmur, sometimes painful."

"Only in circumstances so favorable as to be virtually unobtainable could Sarsfield succeed in abstaining from the behavior pattern that has led to his repeated prosecution and imprisonment. The excessive crowding of this penitentiary considered, however, I strongly recommend that he be released upon parole. Previous psychiatric reports concerning this inmate have been shallow and erroneous, I regret to note. Perhaps Sarsfield's chief psychological difficulty is that, from obscure causes, he lacks emotional communication with other adults, although able to maintain cordial and healthy relations with small children. He is very nearly a solipsist, which in large part may account for his inability to make firm decisions or pursue any regular occupation. In contradiction of previous analyses of Sarsfield, he should not be described as 'dull normal' intellectually. Francis Xavier Sarsfield distinctly is neither dull nor normal."

Sarsfield had looked up "solipsist," but hadn't found himself much the wiser. He didn't think himself the only existent thing—not most of the time, anyway. He wasn't sure that the old doctor had been real, but he knew that his mother had been real before she went



straight to heaven. He knew that his nightmares probably weren't real; but sometimes, while awake, he could see things that other men couldn't. In a house like this he could glimpse little unaccountable movements out of the corners of his eyes, but it wouldn't do to worry about those. He was afraid of those things which other people couldn't see, yet not so frightened of them as most people were. Some of the other inmates had called him Crazy Frank, and it had been hard to keep down his temper. If you could perceive *more* existent things, though not flesh-and-blood things, than psychiatrists or convicts could—why, were you then a solipsist?

There was no point in puzzling over it. Dad had taken him out of school to work on the farm when he hadn't yet finished the fourth grade, so words like "solipsist" didn't mean much to him. Poets' words, though, he mostly understood. He had picked up a rhyme that made children laugh when he told it to them:

*"Though you don't know it,  
You're a poet.  
Your feet show it:  
They're Longfellow's."*

That wasn't very good poetry, but Henry Wadsworth Longfellow was a good poet. They must have loved Henry Wadsworth Longfellow in this house, and especially "The Children's Hour," because of those three little girls named Alice, Allegra, and Edith, and those lines on the General's boulder. Allegra: that's the prettiest of all names ever, and it means "merry," someone had told him.

He looked at the cheap wristwatch he had bought, besides the wash-and-wear suit, with his last dishwashing money from that Lake Superior summer hotel. Well, midnight! It's up the wooden hill for you, Frank Sarsfield, to your snug little room under the rafters. If anybody comes to Tamarack House tonight, it's out the skylight and through the snow for you, Frank, my boy—and no tiny reindeer. If you want to survive, in prison or out of it, you stick to your own business and let other folks stew in their own juice.

Before he closed his eyes, he would pray for mother's soul—not that she really needed it—and then say the little Scottish prayer he had found in a children's book:

"From ghoulies and ghosties, and long-leggitie beasties, and things that go bump in the night, good Lord deliver us!"

The next morning, the morning before his birthday, Frank Sarsfield

went up the circular stair to the cupola, even before making his breakfast of pickled trout, peaches, and strong coffee. The wind had gone down and it was snowing only lightly now, but the drifts were immense. Nobody would make his way to Anthonyville and Tamarack House this day; the snowplows would be busy elsewhere.

From this height he could see the freeway, and nothing seemed to be moving along it. The dead village lay to the north of him. To the east were river and swamp, the shores lined with those handsome tamaracks, the green gone out of them, which had given this house its name. Everything in sight belonged to Frank.

He had dreamed during the night, the wind howling and whining round the top of the house, and he had known he was dreaming, but it had been even stranger than usual, if less horrible.

In his dream, he had found himself in the dining room of Tamarack House. He had not been alone. The General and Father and Mama and the three little girls had been dining happily at the long table, and he had waited on them. In the kitchen an old woman who was the cook and a girl who cleaned had eaten by themselves. But when he had finished filling the family's plates, he had sat down at the end of the table, as if he had been expected to do that.

The family had talked among themselves and even to him as he ate, but somehow he had not been able to hear what they said to him. Suddenly, though, he had pricked up his ears, because Allegra had spoken to him.

"Frank," she had said, all mischief, "why do they call you Punkinhead?"

The old General had frowned at the head of the table, and Mama had said, "Allegra, don't speak that way to Frank!"

But he had grinned at Allegra, if a little hurt, and had told the girl, "Because some men think I've got a head like a jack-o'-lantern's and not even seeds inside it."

"Nonsense, Frank," Mama had put in, "you have a very handsome head."

"You've got a pretty head, Frank," the three little girls had told him then, almost in chorus, placatingly. Allegra had come round the table to make her peace. "There's going to be a big surprise for you tomorrow, Frank," she had whispered to him. And then she had kissed him on the cheek.

That had waked him. Most of the rest of that howling night he had lain awake trying to make sense of his dream, but he couldn't. The people in it had been more real than the people he met on the long, long trail.

Now he strolled through the house again, admiring everything. It

was almost as if he had seen the furniture and the pictures and the carpets long, long ago. The house must be over a century old, and many of the good things in it must go back to the beginning. He would have two or three more days here until the roads were cleared. There were no newspapers to tell him about the great storm, of course, and no radio that worked; but that didn't matter.

He found a great big handsome *Complete Works of Henry Wadsworth Longfellow*, in red morocco, and an illustrated copy of the *Rubaiyat*. He didn't need to read it, because he had memorized all the quatrains once. There was a black silk ribbon as marker between the pages, and he opened it there—at Quatrain 44, it turned out:

*"Why, if the soul can fling the Dust aside,  
And naked on the Air of Heaven ride,  
Were't not a Shame—were't not a Shame for him  
In this clay carcass crippled to abide?"*

That old Vienna doctor, Frank suspected, hadn't believed in immortal souls. Frank Sarsfield knew better. But also Frank suspected that his soul never would ride, naked or clothed, on the Air of Heaven. Souls! That put him in mind of his sister, a living soul that he had forsaken. He ought to write her a letter on this eve of his sixtieth birthday.

Frank traveled light, his luggage being mostly a safety razor, a hair-brush, and a comb; he washed his shirt and socks and underclothes every night, and often his wash-and-wear suit, too. But he did carry with him a few sheets of paper and a ballpoint pen. Sitting down at the library table—he had built a fire in the library stove also, there being no lack of logs—he began to write to Mary Sarsfield, alone in the rotting farmhouse in New Hampshire. His spelling wasn't good, he knew, but today he was careful at his birthday letter, using the big old dictionary with the General's bookplate in it.

To write that letter took most of the day. Two versions were discarded. At last Frank had done the best he could.

*Dearest Mary my sister,*

*Its been nearly 9 years since I came to visit you and borrowed the \$78 from you and went away again and never paid it back. I guess you dont want to see your brother Frank again after what I did that time and other times but the Ethiopian can not change his skin nor the leopard his spots and when some man like a Jehovahs Witness or that rancher with all the cash gives me quite a lot of money I mean to send you what I owe but the post office*

isnt handy at the time so I spend it on presents for little kids I meet and buying new clothes and such so I never get around to sending you that \$78 Mary. Right now I have \$29 and more but the post office at this place is folded up and by the time I get to the next town the money will be mostly gone and so it goes. I guess probably you need the money and Im sorry Mary but maybe some day I will win in the lottery and then Ill give you all the thousands of dollars I win.

Well Mary its been 41 years and 183 days since Mother passed away and here I am 60 years old tomorrow and you getting on toward 56. I pray that your cough is better and that your son and my nephew Jack is doing better than he was in Tallahassee Florida. Some time Mary if you would write to me c/o Father Justin O'Malley in Albatross Michigan where he is pastor now I would stop by his rectory and get your letter and read it with joy. But I know Ive been a very bad brother and I dont blame you Mary if you never get around to writing your brother Frank.

Mary Ive been staying out of jails and working a little here and there along the road. Now Mary do you know what I hate most about those prisons? Why not being on the road you will say. No Mary the worst thing is the foul language the convicts use from morning till night. Taking the name of their Lord in vain is the least they do. There is a foul curse word in their every sentence. I wasnt brought up that way any more than you Mary and I will not revile woman or child. It is like being in H--to hear it.

Im not in bad shape except the diabetes is no better but I take my pills for it when I can buy them and dont have to take needles for it and my heart hurts me dreadfully bad sometimes when I lift heavy things hours on end and sometimes it hurts me worse at night when Ive been just lying there thinking of the life Ive led and how I ought to pay you the \$78 and pay back other folks that helped me too. I owe Father O'Malley \$497.11 now altogether and I keep track of it in my head and when the lottery ticket wins he will not be forgot.

Some people have been quite good to me and I still can make them laugh and I recite to them and generally I start my reciting with what No Person of Quality wrote hundreds of years ago.

Seven wealthy towns contend for Homer dead

Through which the living Homer begged his  
bread.

They like that and also usually they like Thomas Grays Elegy in a Country Churchyard leaving the world to darkness and to me and I recite all of that and sometimes some of the Quatrains of

Omar. At farms when they ask me I chop wood for these folk and I help with the dishes but I still break a good many as you learned Mary 9 years ago but I didnt mean to do it Mary because I am just clumsy in all ways. Oh yes I am good at reciting Frosts Stopping by Woods and his poem about the Hired Man. I have been reading the poetical works of Thomas Stearns Eliot so I can recite his *The Hollow Men* or much of it and also his *Book of Practical Cats* which is comical when I come to college towns and some professor or his wife gives me a sandwich and maybe \$2 and maybe a ride to the next town.

Where I am now Mary I ought to study the poems of John Greenleaf Whittier because theres been a real blizzard maybe the biggest in the state for many years and Im Snowbound. Years ago I tried to memorize all that poem but I got only part way for it is a whopper of a poem.

I dont hear much good Music Mary because of course at the motels there isn't any phonograph or tape recorder. Id like to hear some good string quartet or maybe old folk songs well sung for music hath charms to soothe the savage breast. Theres an old Edison at the house where Im staying now and what do you know they have a record of a song you and I used to sing together Theres a Long Long Trail A Winding. Its about the newest record in this house Ill play it again soon thinking of you Mary my sister. O there is a long long night of waiting.

Mary right now Im at a big fine house where the people have gone away for awhile and I watch the house for them and keep some of the rooms warm. Let me assure you Mary I wont take anything from this good old house when I go. These are nice people I know and I just came in out of the storm and Im very fond of their 3 sweet little girls. I remember what you looked like when I ran away first and you looked like one of them called Alice. The one I like best though is Allegra because she makes mischief and laughs a lot but is innocent.

I came here just yesterday but it seems as if Id lived in this house before but of course I couldnt have and I feel at home here. Nothing in this house could scare me much. You might not like it Mary because of little noises and glimpses you get but its a lovely house and as you know I like old places that have been lived in lots.

By the way Mary once upon a time Father O'Malley told me that to the Lord all time is eternally present. I think this means everything that happens in the world in any day goes on all at once. So God sees what went on in this house long ago and whats going on in this house today all at the same time. Its just as well we

*dont see through Gods eyes because then wed know everything thats going to happen to us and because Im such a sinner I dont want to know. Father O'Malley says that God may forgive me everything and have something special in store for me but I dont think so because why should He?*

*And Father O'Malley says that maybe some people work out their Purgatory here on earth and I might be one of these. He says we are spirits in the prisonhouse of the body which is like we were serving Time in the world here below and maybe God forgave me long ago and Im just waiting my time and paying for what I did and it will be alright in the end. Or maybe Im being given some second chance to set things right but as Father O'Malley put it to do that Id have to fortify my Will and do some Signal Act of contrition. Father O'Malley even says I might not have to do the Act actually if only I just made up my mind to do it really and truly because what God counts is the intention. But I think people who are in Purgatory must know they are climbing up and have hope and Mary I think Im going down down down even though Ive stayed out of prisons some time now.*

*Father O'Malley tells me that for everybody the battle is won or lost already in God's sight and that though Satan thinks he has a good chance to conquer actually Satan has lost forever but doesnt know it. Mary I never did anybody any good but only harm to ones that loved me. If just once before I die I could do one Signal Act that was truly good then God might love me and let me have the Beatific Vision. Yet Mary I know Im weak of will and a coward and lazy and Ive missed my chance forever.*

*Well Mary my only sister Ive bored you long enough and I just wanted to say hello and tell you to be of good cheer. Im sorry I whined and complained like a little boy about my health because Im still strong and deserve all the pain I get. Mary if you can forgive your big brother who never grew up please pray for me sometime because nobody else does except possibly Father O'Malley when he isn't busy with other prayers. I pray for Mother every night and every other night for you and once a month for Dad. You were a good little girl and sweet. Now I will say good bye and ask your pardon for bothering you with my foolishness. Also Im sorry your friends found out I was just a hobo when I was with you 9 years ago and I dont blame you for being angry with me then for talking too much and I know I wasnt fit to lodge in your house. There arent many of us old real hobos left only beatniks and such that cant walk or chop wood and I guess that is just as well. It is a degrading life Mary but I cant stop walking down that long long*

*trail not knowing where it ends.*

*Your Loving Brother  
Francis (Frank)*

*P.S.: I don't wish to mislead so I will add Mary that the people who own this house didnt exactly ask me in but its alright because I wont do any harm here but a little good if I can. Good night again Mary.'*

Now he needed an envelope, but he had forgotten to take one from the last motel, where the Presbyterian minister had put him up. There must be some in Tamarack House, and one would not be missed, and that would not be very wrong because he would take nothing else. He found no envelopes in the drawer of the library table: so he went up the stairs and almost knocked at the closed door of Allegra's Room. Foolish! He opened the door gently.

He had admired Allegra's small rosewood desk. In its drawer was a leather letter-folder, the kind with a blotter, he found, and in the folder were several yellowed envelopes. Also lying face up in the folder was a letter of several small pages, in a woman's hand, a trifle shaky. He started to sit down to read Allegra's letter that never was sent to anybody, but it passed through his mind that his great body might break the delicate rosewood chair that belonged to Allegra, so he read the letter standing. It was dated January 14, 1969. On that birthday of his, he had been in Joliet prison.

How beautifully Allegra wrote!

*Darling Celia,*

*This is a lonely day at Tamarack House, just fifty-four years after your great-grandfather the General died, so I am writing to my grand-niece to tell you how much I hope you will be able to come up to Anthonyville and stay with me next summer-if I still am here. The doctor says that only God knows whether I will be. Your grandmother wants me to come down your way to stay with her for the rest of this winter, but I can't bear to leave Tamarack House at my age, for they might have to put me in a rest-home down there and then I wouldn't see this old house again.*

*I am all right, really, because kind Mr. Connor looks in every day, and Mrs Williams comes every other day to clean. I am not sick, my little girl, but simply older than my years, and running down. When you come up next summer, God willing, I will make you that soft toast you like, and perhaps Mr. Connor will turn the crank for the ice-cream, and I may try to make some preserves*



*with you to help me.*

*You weren't lonely, were you, when you stayed with me last summer for a whole month? Of course there are fewer than a hundred people left in Anthonyville now, and most of those are old. They say that there will be practically nobody living in the town a few years from now, when the new highway is completed and the old one is abandoned. There were more than two thousand people here in town and roundabout, a few years after the General built Tamarack House! But first the lumber industry gave out, and then the mines were exhausted, and the prison-break in 1915 scared many away forever. There are no passenger trains now, and they say the railway line will be pulled out altogether when the new freeway—they have just begun building it to the east—is ready for traffic. But we still have the maples and the tamaracks, and there are ever so many raccoons and opossums and squirrels for you to watch—and a lynx, I think, and an otter of two, and many deer.*

*Celia, last summer you asked me about the General's death and all the things that happened then, because you had heard something of them from your Grandmother Edith. But I didn't wish to frighten you, so I didn't tell you everything. You are older now, and you have a right to know, because when you grow up you will be one of the trustees of the Anthony Family Trust, and then this old house will be in your charge when I am gone. Tamarack House is not at all frightening, except a little in the morning on every January 14. I do hope that you and the other trustees will keep the house always, with the money that Father left to me—he was good at making money, even though the forests vanished and the mines failed, by his investments in Chicago—and which I am leaving to the Family Trust. I've kept the house just as it was, for the sake of the General's memory and because I love it that way.*

*You asked just what happened on January 14, 1915. There were seven people who slept in the house that month—not counting Cook and Cynthia (who was a kind of nannie to us girls and also cleaned), because they slept at their houses in the village. In the house, of course, was the General, my grandfather, your great-grandfather, who was nearly eighty years old. Then there were Father and Mama, and the three of us little sisters, and dear Frank.*

*Alice and sometimes even that baby Edith used to tease me in those days by screaming, "Frank's Allegra's sweetheart! Frank's Allegra's sweetheart!" I used to chase them, but I suppose it was true: he liked me best. Of course he was about sixty years old, though not so old as I am now, and I was a little thing. He used to take me through the swamps and show me the muskrats' houses. The*



first time he took me on such a trip, Mama raised her eye-brows when he was out of the room, but the General said, "I'll warrant Frank: I have his papers."

Alice and Edith might just as well have shouted, "Frank's Allegra's slave!" He read to me—oh, Robert Louis Stevenson's poems and all sorts of books. I never had another sweetheart, partly because almost all the young men left Anthonyville as I grew up when there was no work for them here, and the ones that remained didn't please Mama.

We three sisters used to play Creepmouse with Frank, I remember well. We would be the Creepmice, and would sneak up and scare him when he wasn't watching, and he would pretend to be terrified. He made up a little song for us—or, rather, he put words to some tune he had borrowed:

"Down, down, down in Creepmouse Town  
All the lamps are low,  
And the little rodent feet  
Softly come and go

"There's a rat in Creepmouse Town  
And a bat or two:  
Everything in Creepmouse Town  
Would swiftly frighten you!"

Do you remember, Celia, that the General was State Supervisor of Prisons and Reformatories for time out of mind? He was a good architect, too, and designed Anthonyville State Prison, without taking any fee for himself, as a model prison. Some people in the capital said that he did it to give employment to his country, but really it was because the site was so isolated that it would be difficult for convicts to escape.

The General knew Frank's last name, but he never told the rest of us. Frank had been in Anthonyville State Prison at one time, and later in other prisons, and the General had taken him out of one of those other prisons on parole, having known Frank when he was locked up at Anthonyville. I never learned what Frank had done to be sentenced to prison, but he was gentle with me and everybody else, until that early morning of January 14.

The General was amused by Frank, and said that Frank would be better off with us than anywhere else. So Frank became our hired man, and chopped the firewood for us, and kept the fires going in the stoves and fireplaces, and sometimes served at dinner. In sum-

mer he was supposed to scythe the lawns, but of course summer didn't come. Frank arrived by train at Anthonyville Station in October, and we gave him the little room at the top of the house.

Well, on January 12 Father went off to Chicago on business. We still had the General. Every night he barred the shutters on the ground floor, going round to all the rooms by himself. Mama knew he did it because there was a rumor that some life convicts at the Prison "had it in" for the Supervisor of Prisons, although the General had retired five years earlier. Also they may have thought he kept a lot of money in the house—when actually, what with the timber gone and the mines going, in those times we were rather hard pressed and certainly kept our money in the bank at Duluth. But we girls didn't know why the General closed the shutters, except that it was one of the General's rituals. Besides, Anthonyville State Prison was supposed to be escape-proof. It was just that the General always took precautions, though ever so brave.

Just before dawn, Celia, on the cold morning of January 14, 1915, we all were waked by the siren of the Prison, and we all rushed downstairs in our nightclothes, and we could see that part of the Prison was afire. O, the sky was red! The General tried to telephone the Prison, but he couldn't get through, and later it turned out that the lines had been cut.

Next—it all happened so swiftly—we heard shouting somewhere down Main Street, and then guns went off. The General knew what that meant. He had got his trousers and his boots on, and now he struggled with his old military overcoat, and he took his old army revolver. "Lock the door behind me, girl," he told Mama. She cried and tried to pull him back inside, but he went down into the snow, nearly eighty though he was.

Only three or four minutes later, we heard the shots. The General had met the convicts at the gate. It was still dark, and the General had cataracts on his eyes. They say he fired first, and missed. Those bad men had broken into Mr. Emmons' store and taken guns and axes and whiskey. They shot the General—shot him again and again and again.

The next thing we knew, they were chopping at our front door with axes. Mama hugged us.

Celia dear, writing all this has made me so silly! I feel a little odd, so I must go lie down for an hour or two before telling you the rest. Celia, I do hope you will love this old house as much as I have. If I'm not here when you come up, remember that where I have gone I will know the General and Father and Mama and Alice and poor dear Frank, and will be ever so happy with them.

*Be a good little girl, my Celia.*

The letter ended there, unsigned.

Frank clumped downstairs to the Sunday parlor. He was crying, for the first time since he had fought that professional heavyweight on October 19, 1943. Allegra's letter—if only she'd finished it! What had happened to those little girls, and Mama, and that other Frank? He thought of something from the Holy Bible: "It were better for him that a millstone were hanged about his neck, and he cast into the sea, than that he should offend one of these little ones."

Already it was almost evening. He lit the wick in the cranberry-glass lamp that hung from the middle of the parlor ceiling, standing on a chair to reach it. Why not enjoy more light? On a whim, he arranged upon the round table four silver candlesticks that had rested above the fireplace. He needed three more, and those he fetched from the dining room. He lit every candle in the circle: one for the General, one for Father, one for Mama, one for Alice, one for Allegra, one for Edith—and one for Frank.

The dear names of those little girls! He might as well recite aloud, it being good practice for the approaching days on the long, long trail:

*"I hear in the chamber above me  
The patter of little feet,  
The sound of a door that is opened,  
And voices soft ana sweet . . ."*

Here he ceased. Had he heard something in the passage—or "descending the broad hall stair"? Because of the wind outside, he could not be certain. It cost him a gritting of his teeth to rise and open the parlor door. Of course no one could be seen in the hall or on the stair. "Crazy Frank," men had called him at Joliet and other prisons: he had clenched his fists, but had kept a check upon himself. Didn't Saint Paul say that the violent take heaven by storm? Perhaps he had barked up the wrong tree; perhaps he would be spewed out of His mouth for being too peaceful.

Shutting the door, he went back to the fireside. Those lines of Longfellow had been no evocation. He put "The Long, Long Trail" on the old phonograph again, strolling about the room until the record ran out. There was an old print of a Great Lakes schooner on one wall that he liked. Beside it, he noticed, there seemed to be some pellets embedded in a closet doorjamb, but painted over, as if someone had fired a shotgun in the parlor in the old days. "The violent take

it by storm . . . ” He admired the grand piano; perhaps Allegra had learnt to play it. There were one or two big notches or gashes along one edge of the piano, varnished over, hard though that wood was. Then Frank sank into the big chair again and stared at the burning logs.

Just how long he had dozed, he did not know. He woke abruptly. Had he heard a whisper, the faintest whisper? He tensed to spring up. But before he could move, he saw reflections in the tall mirror.

Something had moved in the corner by the bookcase. No doubt about it: that small something had stirred again. Also something crept behind one of the satin sofas, and something else lurked near the piano. All these were at his back: he saw the reflections in the glass, as in a glass darkly, more alarming than physical forms. In this high shadowy room, the light of the kerosene lamp and of the seven candles did not suffice.

From near the bookcase, the first of them emerged into candlelight; then came the second, and the third. They were giggling, but he could not hear them-only see their faces, and those not clearly. He was unable to stir, and the gooseflesh prickled all over him, and his hair rose at the back of his big head.

They were three little girls, barefoot, in their long muslin nightgowns, ready for bed. One may have been as much as twelve years old, and the smallest was little more than a baby. The middle one was Allegra, tiny even for her tender years, and a little imp: he knew, he knew! They were playing Creepmouse.

The three of them stole forward, Allegra in the lead, her eyes alight. He could see them plain now, and the dread was ebbing out of him. He might have risen and turned to greet them across the great gulf of time, but any action-why, what might it do to these little ones? Frank sat frozen in his chair, looking at the nimble reflections in the mirror, and nearer they came, perfectly silent. Allegra vanished from the glass, which meant that she must be standing just behind him.

He must please them. Could he speak? He tried, and the lines came out hoarsely:

*“Down, down, down in Creepmouse Town  
All the lamps are low,  
And the little rodent feet . . . ”*

He was not permitted to finish. Wow! There came a light tug at the curly white hair on the back of his head. O to talk with Allegra, the imp! Recklessly, he heaved his bulk out of the chair, and swung round-too late.

The parlor door was closing. But from the hall came another whisper, ever so faint, ever so unmistakable: "Good night, Frank!" There followed subdued giggles, scampering, and then the silence once more.

He strode to the parlor door. The hall was empty again, and the broad stair. Should he follow them up? No, all three would be abed now. Should he knock at Mama's Room, muttering, "Mrs. Anthony, are the children all right?" No, he hadn't the nerve for that, and it would be presumptuous. He had been given one moment of perception, and no more. Somehow he knew that they would not go so far as the garret floor. Ah, he needed fresh air! He snuffed out lamp and candles, except for one candlestick—Allegra's—that he took with him. Out into the hall he went. He unfastened the front door with that oaken patch about the middle of it and stepped upon the porch, leaving the burning candle just within the hall. The wind had risen again, bringing still more snow. It was black as sin outside, and the temperature must be thirty below.

To him the wind bore one erratic peal of the desolate church bell of Anthonyville, and then another. How strong the blast must be through that belfry! Frank retreated inside from that unfathomable darkness and that sepulchral bell which seemed to toll for him. He locked the thick door behind him and screwed up his courage for the expedition to his room at the top of the old house.

But why shudder? He loved them now, Allegra most of all. Up the broad stairs to the second floor he went, hearing only his own clumsy footfalls, and past the clay-sealed doors of the General and Father and Mama and Alice and Allegra and Edith. No one whispered, no one scampered.

In Frank's Room, he rolled himself in his blankets and quilt (had Allegra helped stitch the patchwork?), and almost at once the consciousness went out of him, and he must have slept dreamless for the first night since he was a farm boy.

So profound had been his sleep, deep almost as death, that the siren may have been wailing for some minutes before at last it roused him. Frank knew that horrid sound. It had called for him thrice before, as he fled from prisons. Who wanted him now? He heaved his ponderous body out of the warm bed. The candle that he had brought up from the Sunday parlor and left burning all night was flickering in its socket, but by that flame he could see the hour on his watch: seven o'clock, too soon for dawn.

Through the narrow skylight, as he flung on his clothes, the sky glowed an unnatural red, though it was long before sunup. The prison

siren ceased to wail, as if choked off. Frank lumbered to the little frieze window and saw to the north, perhaps two miles distant, a monstrous mass of flames shooting high into the air. The prison was afire.

Then came shots outside: first the bark of a heavy revolver, followed irregularly by blasts of shotguns or rifles. Frank was lacing his boots with a swiftness uncongenial to him. He got into his overcoat as there came a crashing and battering down below. That sound, too, he recognized, woodchopper that he had been: axes shattering the front door.

Amid this pandemonium, Frank was too bewildered to grasp altogether where he was or even how this catastrophe might be fitted into the pattern of time. All that mattered was flight; the scheme of his escape remained clear in his mind. Pull up the chair below the skylight, heave yourself out to the upper roof, descend those iron rungs to the woodshed roof, make for the other side of the highway, then—why, then you must trust to circumstance, Frank. It's that long, long trail a-winding for you.

Now he heard a woman screaming within the house, and slipped and fumbled in his alarm. He had got upon the chair, opened the skylight, and was trying to obtain a good grip on the icy outer edge of the skylight frame, when someone knocked and kicked at the door of Frank's Room.

Yet those were puny knocks and kicks. He was about to heave himself upward when, in a relative quiet—the screaming had ceased for a moment—he heard a little shrill voice outside his door, urgently pleading: "Frank, Frank, let me in!"

He was arrested in flight as though great weights had been clamped to his ankles. That little voice he knew, as if it were part of him: Allegra's voice.

For a brief moment he still meant to scramble out the skylight. But the sweet little voice was begging. He stumbled off the chair, upset it, and was at the door in one stride.

"Is that you, Allegra?"

"Open it, Frank, *please* open it!"

He turned the key and pulled the bolt. On the threshold the little girl stood, indistinct by the dying candlelight, terribly pale, all tears, frantic.

Frank snatched her up. Ah, this was the dear real Allegra Anthony, all warm and soft and sobbing, flesh and blood! He kissed her cheek gently.

She clung to him in terror, and then squirmed loose, tugging at his heavy hand: "Oh, Frank, come on! Come downstairs! They're

hurting Mama!"

"Who is, little girl?" He held her tiny hand, his body quivering with dread and indecision. "Who's down there, Allegra?"

"The bad men! *Come on*, Frank!" Braver than he, the little thing plunged back down the garret stair into the blackness below.

"Allegra! Come back here—come back now!" He bellowed it, but she was gone.

Up two flights of stairs, there poured to him a tumult of shrieks, curses, laughter, breaking noises. Several men were below, their speech slurred and raucous. He did not need Allegra to tell him what kind of men they were, for he heard prison slang and prison foulness, and he shook all over. There still was the skylight.

He would have turned back to that hole in the roof, had not Allegra squealed in pain somewhere on the second floor. Dazed, trembling, unarmed, Frank went three steps down the garret staircase. "Allegra! Little girl! What is it, Allegra?"

Someone was charging up the stair toward him. It was a burly man in the prison uniform, a lighted lantern in one hand and a glittering axe in the other. Frank had no time to turn. The man screeched obscenely at him and swung the axe.

In those close quarters, wielded by a drunken man, it was a chancy weapon. The edge shattered the plaster wall; the flat of the blade thumped upon Frank's shoulder. Frank, lurching forward, took the man by the throat with a mighty grip. They all tumbled pell-mell down the steep stairs—the two men, the axe, the lantern.

Frank's ursine bulk landed atop the stranger's body, and Frank heard his adversary's bones crunch. The lantern had broken and gone out. The convict's head hung loose on his shoulders, Frank found as he groped for the axe. Then he trampled over the fallen man and flung himself along the corridor, gripping the axe-helve. "Allegra! Allegra girl!"

From the head of the main stair, he could see that the lamps and candles were burning in the hall and in the rooms of the ground floor. All three children were down there, wailing, and above their noise rose Mama's shrieks again. A mob of men were stamping, breaking things, roaring with amusement and desire, shouting filth. A bottle shattered.

His heart pounding as if it would burst out of his chest, Frank hurried rashly down the stair and went, all crimson with fury, into the Sunday parlor, the double-bitted axe swinging in his hand. They all were there: the little girls, Mama, and five wild men. "Stop that!" Frank roared with all the power of his lungs. "You let them go!"

Everyone in the parlor stood transfixed at the summons like the



Last Trump. Allegra had been tugging pathetically at the leg of a dark man who gripped her mother's waist, and the other girls sputtered and sobbed, cornered, as tall man poured a bottle of whiskey over them. Mrs Anthony's gown was ripped nearly its whole length, and a third man was bending her backward by her long hair, as if he would snap her spine. Near the hall door stood a man like a long lean rat, the Rat of Creepmouse Town, a shotgun on his arm, gape-jawed at Frank's intervention. Guns and axes lay scattered about the Turkey carpet. By the fireplace, a fifth man had been heating the poker in the flames.

For that tableau-moment, they all stared astonished at the raving giant who had burst upon them; and the giant, puffing, stared back with his strange blue eyes. "O Frank!" Allegra sobbed: it was more command than entreaty—as if, Frank thought in a flash of insane mirth, he were like the boy in the fairy tale who could cry confidently "All heads off but mine!"

He-knew what these men were, the rats and bats of Creepmouse Town: the worst men in any prison, lifers who had made their hell upon earth, killers all of them and worse than killers. The rotten damnation showed in all those flushed and drunken faces. Then the dark man let go of Mama and said in relief, with a coughing laugh, "Hell, it's only old Punkinhead Frank, clowning again! Have some fun for yourself, Frank boy!"

"Hey, Frank," Ratface asked, his shotgun crooked under his arm, "where'd the old man keep his money?"

Frank towered there perplexed, the berserker-lust draining out of him—almost bashful—and frightened worse than ever before in all his years on the trail. What should he shout now? What should he do? Who was he to resist such perfect evil? They were five to one, and those five were fiends from down under, and that one a coward. Long ago he had been weighed in the balance and found wanting.

Mama was the first to break the tableau. Her second captor had relaxed his clutch upon hair; she prodded the little girls before her and leaped for the door.

The hair-puller was after her at once, but she bounded past Ratface's shotgun, which had wavered toward Frank, and Alice and Edith were ahead of her. Allegra, her eyes wide and desperate, tripped over the rungs of a broken chair. Everything happened in half a second. The hair-puller caught Allegra by her little ankle.

Then Frank bellowed again, loudest in all his life, and he swung his axe high above his head and downward, a skillful dreadful stroke, catching the hair-puller's arm just below the shoulder. At once the man began to scream and spout, while Allegra fled after her mother.



Falling, the hair-puller collided with Ratface, spoiling his aim, but one barrel of the shotgun fired, and Frank felt pain in his side. His bloody axe on high, he hulked between the five men and the door.

All the men's faces were glaring at Frank, incredulously, as if demanding how he dared stir against them. Three convicts were scrambling tipsily for weapons on the floor. As Frank strode among them, he saw the expression on those faces change from gloating to desperation. Just as his second blow descended, there passed through his mind a kind of fleshly collage of death he had seen once at a farmyard gate: the corpses of five weasels nailed to a gatepost by the farmer, their frozen open jaws agape like damned souls in hell.

"All heads off but mine!" Frank heard himself braying. "All heads off but mine!" He hacked and hewed, his own screams of lunatic fury drowning their screams of terror.

For less than three minutes, shots, thuds, shrieks, crashes, terrible wailing. They could not get past him to the doorway.

"Come on!" Frank was raging as he stood in the middle of the parlor. "Come on, who's next? All heads off but mine! Who's next?"

There came no answer but a ghastly rattle from one of the five heaps that littered the carpet. Blood-soaked from hair to boots, the berserker towered alone, swaying where he stood.

His mind began to clear. He had been shot twice, Frank guessed, and the pain at his heart was frightful. Into his frantic consciousness burst all the glory of what he had done, and all the horror.

He became almost rational: he must count the dead. One upstairs, five here. One, two, three, four, five heaps. That was correct: all present and accounted for, Frank boy, Punkinhead Frank, Crazy Frank. All dead and accounted for. Had he thought that thought before? Had he taken that mock roll before? Had he wrought this slaughter twice over, twice in this same old room?

But where were Mama and the little girls? They mustn't see this blood-splashed inferno of a parlor. He was looking at himself in the tall mirror, and he saw a bear-man loathsome with his own blood and others' blood. He looked like the Wild Man of Borneo. In abhorrence he flung his axe aside. Behind him sprawled the reflections of the hacked dead.

Fighting down his heart-pain, he reeled into the hall. "Little girls! Mrs. Anthony! Allegra, O Allegra!" His voice was less strong. "Where are you? It's safe now!"

They did not call back. He labored up the main stair, clutching his side. "Allegra, speak to your Frank!" They were in none of the bedrooms.

He went up the garret stair, whatever the agony, then beyond

Frank's Room to the cupola stair, and ascended that slowly, gasping hard. They were not in the cupola. Might they have run out among the trees? In that cold dawn, he stared on every side; he thought his sight was beginning to fail.

He could see no one outside the house. The drifts still choked the street beyond the gateposts, and those two boulders protruded impassive from untrodden snow. Back down the flights of stairs he made his way, clutching at the rail, at the wall. Surely the little girls hadn't strayed into that parlor butcher-shop? He bit his lip and peered into the Sunday parlor.

The bodies all were gone. The splashes and ropy strands of blood all were gone. Everything stood in perfect order, as if violence never had touched Tamarack House. The sun was rising, and sunlight filtered through the shutters. Within fifteen minutes the trophies of his savage victory had disappeared.

It was like the recurrent dream which had tormented Frank when he was little: he separated from Mother in the dark, wandering solitary in empty lanes, no soul alive in all the universe but little Frank. Yet those tremendous axe-blows had severed living flesh and blood, and for one moment, there on the stairs, he had held in his arms a tiny quick Allegra: of that reality he did not doubt at all.

Wonder subduing pain, he staggered to the front door. It stood unshattered. He drew the bar and turned the key, and went down the stone steps into the snow. He was weak now, and did not know where he was going. Had he done a Signal Act? Might the Lord give him one parting glimpse of little Allegra, somewhere among the trees? He slipped in a drift, half rose, sank again, crawled. He found himself at the foot of one of those boulders-the further one, the stone he had not inspected.

The snow had fallen away from the face of the bronze tablet. Clutching the boulder, Frank drew himself up. By bringing his eyes very close to the tablet, he could read the words, a dying man panting against deathless bronze:

In loving memory of

FRANK

a spirit in prison, made for eternity

who saved us and died for us

January 14, 1915

"Why, if the Soul can fling the Dust aside,  
And naked on the Air of Heaven ride,  
Were't not a Shame--were't not a Shame for him  
In this clay carcass crippled to abide?"

# ALGERNON BLACKWOOD

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## The Damned

*Algernon Blackwood (1869-1951) was one of the founding fathers of modern weird fiction. Unlike Sheridan Le Fanu, and his spiritual successor M.R. James, Blackwood did not follow the traditional route of the classic British ghost story. Although his first collection, The Empty House (1906) carried a number of conventional ghost stories, he soon carved out for himself a special area, where he explored the realms of the unseen powers of Nature. To Blackwood Nature was the omnipotent deity to which mankind was but an interfering and bumbling pawn. At times man could heighten his awareness of the world about him, either through drugs, special training or a natural affinity with Nature, and then he would become aware of and be at the mercy of powers unknown. Blackwood used this to stunning effect in many of his stories, most of which are based on some personal experience. In 'The Damned', first published in his collection Incredible Adventures in 1914, he added the memory of his own upbringing in a strict evangelical household where he was kept apart from the rest of the world for fear he would stumble onto the road to Hell. In 'The Damned', you might say Blackwood relived his own Hell.*

## 1

"I'M over forty, Frances, and rather set in my ways," I said good-naturedly, ready to yield if she insisted that our going together on the visit involved her happiness. "My work is rather heavy just now too, as you know. The question is, *could* I work there— with a lot of unassorted people in the house?"

"Mabel doesn't mention any other people, Bill," was my sister's rejoinder. "I gather she's alone—as well as lonely."

By the way she looked sideways out of the window at nothing, it was obvious she was disappointed, but to my surprise she did not urge the point; and as I glanced at Mrs. Franklyn's invitation lying upon her sloping lap, the neat, childish handwriting conjured up a mental picture of the banker's widow, with her timid, insignificant personality, her pale grey eyes and her expression as of a backward child. I thought, too, of the roomy country mansion her late husband had altered to suit his particular needs, and of my visit to it a few years ago when its barren spaciousness suggested a wing of Kensington Museum fitted up temporarily as a place to eat and sleep in. Comparing it mentally with the poky Chelsea flat where I and my sister kept impecunious house, I realised other points as well. Unworthy details flashed across me to entice: the fine library, the organ, the quiet work-room I should have, perfect service, the delicious cup of early tea, and hot baths at any moment of the day—without a geyser!

"It's a longish visit, a month—isn't it?" I hedged, smiling at the details that seduced me, and ashamed of my man's selfishness, yet knowing that Frances expected it of me. "There *are* points about it, I admit. If you're set on my going with you, I could manage it all right."

I spoke at length in this way because my sister made no answer. I saw her tired eyes gazing into the dreariness of Oakley Street and felt a pang strike through me. After a pause, in which again she said no word, I added: "So, when you write the letter, you might hint, perhaps, that I usually work all the morning, and—er—am not a very lively visitor! Then she'll understand, you see." And I half-rose to return to my diminutive study, where I was slaving, just then, at an absorbing article on Comparative Esthetic Values in the Blind and Deaf.

But Frances did not move. She kept her grey eyes upon Oakley Street where the evening mist from the river drew mournful perspectives into view. It was late October. We heard the omnibuses thunder-

ing across the bridge. The monotony of that broad, characterless street seemed more than usually depressing. Even in June sunshine it was dead, but with autumn its melancholy soaked into every house between King's Road and the Embankment. It washed thought into the past, instead of inviting it hopefully towards the future. For me, its easy width was an avenue through which nameless slums across the river sent creeping messages of depression, and I always regarded it as Winter's main entrance into London—fog, slush, gloom trooped down it every November, waving their forbidding banners till March came to rout them. Its one claim upon my love was that the south wind swept sometimes unobstructed up it, soft with suggestions of the sea. These lugubrious thoughts I naturally kept to myself, though I never ceased to regret the little flat whose cheapness had seduced us. Now, as I watched my sister's impassive face, I realised that perhaps she, too, felt as I felt, yet, brave woman, without betraying it.

"And, look here, Fanny," I said, putting a hand upon her shoulder as I crossed the room, "it would be the very thing for you. You're worn out with catering and house-keeping. Mabel is your oldest friend, besides, and you're hardly seen her since *he* died—"

"She's been abroad for a year, Bill, and only just came back," my sister interposed. "She came back rather unexpectedly, though I never thought she would go *there* to live—" She stopped abruptly. Clearly, she was only speaking half her mind. "Probably," she went on, "Mabel wants to pick up old links again."

"Naturally," I put in, "yourself chief among them." The veiled reference to the house I let pass. It involved discussing the dead man for one thing.

"I feel I ought to go anyhow," she resumed, "and of course it would be jollier if you came too. You'd get in such a muddle here by yourself, and eat wrong things, and forget to air the rooms, and—oh, everything!" She looked up laughing. "Only" she added, "there's the British Museum—?"

"But there's a big library there," I answered, "and all the books of reference I could possibly want. It was of you I was thinking. You could take up your painting again; you always sell half of what you paint. It would be a splendid rest too, and Sussex is a jolly country to walk in. By all means, Fanny, I advise—"

Our eyes met, as I stammered in my attempts to avoid expressing the thought that hid in both our minds. My sister had a weakness for dabbling in the various "new" theories of the day, and Mabel, who before her marriage had belonged to foolish societies for investigating the future life to the neglect of the present one, had fostered this undesirable tendency. Her amiable, impressionable

temperament was open to every psychic wind that blew. I deplored, detested the whole business. But even more than this I abhorred the later influence that Mr. Franklyn had steeped his wife in, capturing her body and soul in his sombre doctrines. I had dreaded lest my sister also might be caught.

"Now that she is alone again—"

I stopped short. Our eyes now made pretence impossible, for the truth had slipped out inevitably, stupidly, although unexpressed in definite language. We laughed, turning our faces a moment to look at other things in the room. Frances picked up a book and examined its cover as though she had made an important discovery, while I took my case out and lit a cigarette I did not want to smoke. We left the matter there. I went out of the room before further explanation could cause tension. Disagreements grow into discord from such tiny things—wrong adjectives, or a chance inflection of the voice. Frances had a right to her views of life as much as I had. At least, I reflected comfortably, we had separated upon an agreement this time, recognised mutually, though not actually stated.

And this point of meeting was, oddly enough, our way of regarding some one who was dead. For we had both disliked the husband with a great dislike, and during his three years' married life had only been to the house once—for a week-end visit; arriving late on Saturday, we had left after an early breakfast on Monday morning. Ascribing my sister's dislike to a natural jealousy at losing her old friend, I said merely that he displeased me. Yet we both knew that the real emotion lay much deeper. Frances, loyal, honourable creature, had kept silence; and beyond saying that house and grounds— he altered one and laid out the other—distressed her as an expression of his personality somehow ("distressed" was the word she used), no further explanation had passed her lips.

Our dislike of his personality was easily accounted for—up to a point, since both of us shared the artist's point of view that a creed, cut to measure and carefully dried, was an ugly thing, and that a dogma to which believers must subscribe or perish everlastingly was a barbarism resting upon cruelty. But while my own dislike was purely due to an abstract worship of Beauty, my sister's had another twist in it, for with her "new" tendencies, she believed that all religions were an aspect of truth and that no one, even the lowest wretch, could escape "heaven" in the long run.

Samuel Franklyn, the rich banker, was a man universally respected and admired, and the marriage, though Mabel was fifteen years his junior, won general applause; his bride was an heiress in her own right—breweries— and the story of her conversion at a revivalist

meeting where Samuel Franklyn had spoken fervidly of heaven, and terrifying of sin, hell and damnation, even contained a touch of genuine romance. She was a brand snatched from the burning; his detailed eloquence had frightened her into heaven; salvation came in the nick of time; his words had plucked her from the edge of that lake of fire and brimstone where their worm dieth not and the fire is not quenched. She regarded him as a hero, sighed her relief upon his saintly shoulder, and accepted the peace he offered her with a grateful resignation.

For her husband was a "religious man" who successfully combined great riches with the glamour of winning souls. He was a portly figure, though tall, with masterful, big hands, the fingers rather thick and red; and his dignity, that just escaped being pompous, held in it something that was implacable. A convinced assurance, almost remorseless, gleamed in his eyes when he preached especially, and his threats of hell fire must have scared souls stronger than the timid, receptive Mabel whom he married. He clad himself in long frock-coats that buttoned unevenly, big square boots, and trousers that invariably bagged at the knee and were a little short; he wore low collars, spats occasionally, and a tall black hat that was not of silk. His voice was alternately hard and unctuous; and he regarded theatres, ball-rooms and race-courses as the vestibule of that brimstone lake of whose geography he was as positive as of his great banking offices in the City. A philanthropist up to the hilt, however, no one ever doubted his complete sincerity; his convictions were ingrained, his faith borne out by his life—as witness his name upon so many admirable Societies, as treasurer, patron, or heading the donation list. He bulked large in the world of doing good, a broad and stately stone in the rampart against evil. And his heart was genuinely kind and soft for others—who believed as he did.

Yet, in spite of this true sympathy with suffering and his desire to help, he was narrow as a telegraph wire and unbending as a church pillar; he was intensely selfish; intolerant as an officer of the Inquisition, his bourgeois soul constructed a revolting scheme of heaven that was reproduced in miniature in all he did and planned. Faith was the *sine qua non* of salvation, and by "faith" he meant belief in his own particular view of things—"which faith, except every one do keep whole and undefiled, without doubt he shall perish everlastingly." All the world but his own small, exclusive sect must be damned eternally—a pity, but alas, inevitable. *He* was right.

Yet he prayed without ceasing, and gave heavily to the poor—the only thing he could not give being big ideas to his provincial and suburban deity. Pettier than an insect, and more obstinate than a mule,

he had also the superior, sleek humility of a "chosen one." He was churchwarden too. He read the Lessons in a "place of worship," either chilly or overheated, where neither organ, vestments, nor lighted candles were permitted, but where the odour of hair-wash on the boys' heads in the back rows pervaded the entire building.

This portrait of the banker, who accumulated riches both on earth and in heaven, may possibly be overdrawn, however, because Frances and I were "artistic temperaments" that viewed the type with a dislike and distrust amounting to contempt. The majority considered Samuel Franklyn a worthy man and a good citizen. The majority, doubtless, held the saner view. A few years more, and he certainly would have been made a baronet. He relieved much suffering in the world, as assuredly as he caused many souls the agonies of torturing fear by his emphasis upon damnation. Had there been one point of beauty in him, we might have been more lenient; only we found it not, and, I admit, took little pains to search. I shall never forget the look of dour forgiveness with which he heard our excuses for missing Morning Prayers that Sunday morning of our single visit to The Towers. My sister learned that a change was made soon afterwards, prayers being "conducted" after breakfast instead of before.

The Towers stood solemnly upon a Sussex hill amid park-like modern grounds, but the house cannot better be described—it would be so wearisome for one thing—than by saying that it was a cross between an overgrown, pretentious Norwood villa and one of those saturnine Institutes for cripples the train passes as it slinks ashamed through South London into Surrey. It was "wealthily" furnished and at first sight imposing, but on closer acquaintance revealed a meagre personality, barren and austere. One looked for Rules and Regulations on the walls, all signed By Order. The place was a prison that shut out "the world." There was, of course, no billiard-room, no smoking-room, no room for play of any kind, and the great hall at the back, once a chapel which might have been used for dancing, theatricals, or other innocent amusements, was consecrated in his day to meetings of various kinds, chiefly brigades, temperance or missionary societies. There was a harmonium at one end—on the level floor—a raised dais or platform at the other, and a gallery above for the servants, gardeners and coachmen. It was heated with hot-water pipes, and hung with Doré's pictures, though these latter were soon removed and stored out of sight in the attics as being too unspiritual. In polished, shiny wood, it was a representation in miniature of that poky exclusive Heaven he took about with him, externalising it in all he did and planned, even in the grounds about the house.

Changes in The Towers, Frances told me, had been made during



Mabel's year of widowhood abroad—an organ put into the big hall, the library made liveable and recatalogued—when it was permissible to suppose she had found her soul again and returned to her normal, healthy views of life, which included enjoyment and play, literature, music and the arts, without however, a touch of that trivial thoughtlessness usually termed worldliness. Mrs. Franklyn as I remembered her, was a quiet little woman, shallow, perhaps, and easily influenced, but sincere as a dog and thorough in her faithful friendships. Her tastes at heart were catholic, and that heart was simple and unimaginative. That she took up with the various movements of the day was sign merely that she was searching in her limited way for a belief that should bring her peace. She was, in fact, a very ordinary woman, her calibre a little less than that of Frances. I knew they used to discuss all kinds of theories together, but as these discussions never resulted in action, I had come to regard her as harmless. Still, I was not sorry when she married, and I did not welcome now a renewal of the former intimacy. The philanthropist had given her no children, or she would have made a good and sensible mother. No doubt she would marry again.

"Mabel mentions that she's been alone at The Towers since the end of August," Frances told me at tea-time; "and I'm sure she feels out of it and lonely. It would be a kindness to go. Besides, I always liked her."

I agreed. I had recovered from my attack of selfishness. I expressed my pleasure.

"You've written to accept," I said, half statement and half question.

Frances nodded. "I thanked for you," she added quietly, "explaining that you were not free at the moment, but that later, if not convenient, you might come down for a bit and join me."

I stared. Frances sometimes had this independent way of deciding things. I was convicted, and punished into the bargain.

Of course there followed argument and explanation, as between brother and sister who were affectionate, but the recording of our talk could be of little interest. It was arranged thus, Frances and I both satisfied. Two days later she departed for The Towers, leaving me alone in the flat with everything planned for my comfort and good behaviour—she was rather a tyrant in her quiet way—and her last words

I saw her off from Charing Cross rang in my head for a long time after she was gone:

"I'll write and let you know, Bill. Eat properly, mind, and let me know if anything goes wrong."

She waved her small gloved hand, nodded her head till the feather brushed the window, and was gone.

## 2

After the note announcing her safe arrival a week of silence passed, and then a letter came; there were various suggestions for my welfare, and the rest was the usual rambling information and description Frances loved, generously italicised.

"... and we are quite alone," she went on in her enormous handwriting that seemed such a waste of space and labour, "though some others are coming presently, I believe. You could work here to your heart's content. Mabel *quite* understands, and says she would love to have you when you feel free to come. She has changed a bit-back to her old natural self; she never mentions *him*. The place has changed too in certain ways; it has more cheerfulness, I think. *She* has put it in, this cheerfulness, spaded it in, if you know what I mean; but it lies about uneasily and is not natural-quite. The organ is a beauty. She must be very rich now, but she's as gentle and sweet as ever. Do you know, Bill, I think he must have *frightened* her into marrying him. I get the impression she was afraid of him." This last sentence was inked out, but I read it through the scratching; the letters being too big to hide. "He had an inflexible will beneath all that oily kindness which passed for spiritual. He was a real personality, I mean. I'm sure he'd have sent you and me cheerfully to the stake in another century-*for our own good*. Isn't it odd she never speaks of him, even to me?" This, again, was stroked through, though without the intention to obliterate-merely because it was repetition, probably. "The only reminder of him in the house now is a big copy of the presentation portrait that stands on the stairs of the Multitechnic Institute at Peckham-you know-that life-size one with his fat hand sprinkled with rings resting on a thick Bible and the other slipped between the buttons of a tight frock-coat. It hangs in the dining-room and rather dominates our meals. I wish Mabel would take it down. I think she'd like to, if she *dared*. There's not a single photograph of him anywhere, even in her own room. Mrs. Marsh is here-you remember her, *his* housekeeper, the wife of the man who got penal servitude for killing a baby or something-*you* said she robbed him and justified her stealing because the story of the unjust steward was in the Bible! How we laughed over that! *She's* just the same too, gliding about all over the house and turning up when least expected."

Other reminiscences filled the next two sides of the letter, and ran,

without a trace of punctuation, into instructions about a Salamander stove for heating my work-room in the flat; these were followed by things I was to tell the cook, and by requests for several articles she had forgotten and would like sent after her, two of them blouses, with descriptions so lengthy and contradictory that I sighed as I read them—"unless you come down soon, in which case perhaps you wouldn't mind bringing them; *not* the mauve one I wear in the evening sometimes, but the pale blue one with lace round the collar and the crinkly front. They're in the cupboard—or the drawer, I'm not sure which—of my bedroom. *Ask Annie* if you're in doubt. Thanks most *awfully*. Send a telegram, remember, and we'll meet you in the motor *any time*. I don't quite know if I shall stay the whole month—*alone*. It all depends . . ." And she closed the letter, the italicised words increasing recklessly towards the end, with a repetition that Mabel would love to have me "for myself," as also to have a "man in the house," and that I only had to telegraph the day and the train . . . This letter, coming by the second post, interrupted me in a moment of absorbing work, and, having read it through to make sure there was nothing requiring instant attention, I threw it aside and went on with my notes and reading. Within five minutes, however, it was back at me again. That restless thing called "between the lines" fluttered about my mind. My interest in the Balkan States—political article that had been "ordered"—faded. Somewhere, somehow I felt disquieted, disturbed. At first I persisted in my work, forcing myself to concentrate but soon found that a layer of new impressions floated between the article and my attention. It was like a shadow though a shadow that dissolved upon inspection. Once or twice I glanced up, expecting to find some one in the room that the door had opened unobserved and Annie was waiting for instructions. I heard the 'buses thundering across the bridge. I was aware of Oakley Street. Montenegro and the blue Adriatic melted into the October haze along that depressing Embankment that aped a river bank, and sentences from the letter flashed before my eyes and stung me. Picking it up and reading it through more carefully, I rang the bell and told Annie to find the blouses and pack them for the post, showing her finally the written description, and resenting the superior smile with which she at once, interrupted, "*I know them, sir,*" and disappeared.

But it was not the blouses: it was that exasperating thing "between the lines" that put an end to my work with its elusive teasing nuisance. The first sharp impression is alone of value in such a case, for once analysis begins the imagination constructs all kinds of false interpretation. The more I thought, the more I grew fuddled. The letter, it seemed to me, wanted to say another thing; instead the eight sheets

*conveyed* it merely. It came to the edge of disclosure, then halted. There was something on the writer's mind, and I felt uneasy. Studying the sentences brought, however, no revelation, but increased confusion only; for while the uneasiness remained, the first clear hint had vanished. In the end I closed my books and went out to look up another matter at the British Museum Library. Perhaps I should discover it that way—by turning the mind in a totally new direction. I lunched at the Express Dairy in Oxford Street close by, and telephoned to Annie that I would be home to tea at five.

And at tea, tired physically and mentally after breathing the exhausted air of the Rotunda for five hours, my mind suddenly delivered up its original impression, vivid and clear-cut; no proof accompanied the revelation; it was mere presentiment, but convincing. Frances was disturbed in her mind, her orderly, sensible, housekeeping mind; she was uneasy, even perhaps afraid; something in the house distressed her, and she had need of me. Unless I went down, her time of rest and change, her quite necessary holiday, in fact, would be spoilt. She was too unselfish to say this, but it ran everywhere between the lines. I saw it clearly now. Mrs. Franklyn, moreover—and that meant Frances too—would like a “man in the house.” It was a disagreeable phrase, a suggestive way of hinting something she dared not state definitely. The two women in that great, lonely barrack of a house were afraid.

My sense of duty, affection, unselfishness, whatever the composite emotion may be termed, was stirred; also my vanity. I acted quickly, lest reflection should warp clear, decent judgment. “Annie,” I said, when she answered the bell, “you need not send those blouses by the post. I’ll take them down to-morrow when I go. I shall be away a week or two, possibly longer.” And, having looked up a train, I hastened out to telegraph before I could change my fickle mind.

But no desire came that night to change my mind. I was doing the right, the necessary thing. I was even in something of a hurry to get down to The Towers as soon as possible. I chose an early afternoon train.

### 3

A telegram had told me to come to a town ten miles from the house, so I was saved the crawling train to the local station, and travelled down by an express. As soon as we left London the fog cleared off,

and an autumn sun, though without heat in it, painted the landscape with golden browns and yellows. My spirits rose as I lay back in the luxurious motor and sped between the woods and hedges. Oddly enough, my anxiety of overnight had disappeared. It was due, no doubt, to that exaggeration of detail which reflection in loneliness brings. Frances and I had not been separated for over a year, and her letters from The Towers told so little. It had seemed unnatural to be deprived of those intimate particulars of mood and feeling I was accustomed to. We had such confidence in one another, and our affection was so deep. Though she was but five years younger than myself, I regarded her as a child. My attitude was fatherly. In return, she certainly mothered me with a solicitude that never cloyed. I felt no desire to marry while she was still alive. She painted in water-colours with a reasonable success, and kept house for me; I wrote, reviewed books and lectured on aesthetics; we were a humdrum couple of quasi-artists, well satisfied with life, and all I feared for her was that she might become a suffragette or be taken captive by one of these wild theories that caught her imagination sometimes, and that Mabel, for one, had fostered. As for myself, no doubt she deemed me a trifle solid or stolid—I forget which word she preferred—but on the whole there was just sufficient difference of opinion to make intercourse suggestive without monotony, and certainly without quarrelling. Drawing in deep draughts of the stinging autumn air, I felt happy and exhilarated. It was like going for a holiday, with comfort at the end of the journey instead of bargaining for centimes.

But my heart sank noticeably the moment the house came into view. The long drive, lined with hostile monkey trees and formal wellingtonias that were solemn and sedate, was mere extension of the miniature approach to a thousand semi-detached suburban "residences"; and the appearance of The Towers, as we turned the corner with a rush, suggested a commonplace climax to a story that had begun interestingly, almost thrillingly. A villa had escaped from the shadow of the Crystal Palace, thumped its way down by night, grown suddenly monstrous in a shower of rich rain, and settled itself insolently to stay. Ivy climbed about the opulent red-brick walls, but climbed neatly and with disfiguring effect, sham as on a prison or—the simile made me smile—an orphan asylum. There was no hint of the comely roughness of untidy ivy on a ruin. Clipped, trained and precise it was, as on a brand-new protestant church. I swear there was not a bird's nest nor a single earwig in it anywhere. About the porch it was particularly thick, smothering a seventeenth-century lamp with a contrast that was quite horrible. Extensive glass-houses spread away on the farther side of the house; the numerous towers to which

the building owed its name seemed made to hold school bells; and the window-sills, thick with potted flowers, made me think of the desolate suburbs of Brighton or Bexhill. In a commanding position upon the crest of a hill, it overlooked miles of undulating, wooded country southwards to the Downs, but behind it, to the north, thick banks of ilex, holly and privet protected it from the cleaner and more stimulating winds. Hence, though highly placed, it was shut in. Three years had passed since I last set eyes upon it, but the unsightly memory I had retained was justified by the reality. The place was deplorable.

It is my habit to express my opinions audibly sometimes, when impressions are strong enough to warrant it; but now I only sighed "Oh, dear," as I extricated my legs from many rugs and went into the house. A tall parlour-maid, with the bearing of a grenadier, received me, and standing behind her was Mrs. Marsh, the housekeeper, whom I remembered because her untidy black hair had suggested to me that it had been burnt. I went at once to my room my hostess already dressing for dinner, but Frances came in to see me just as I was struggling with my black tie that had got tangled like a bootlace. She fastened it for me in a neat, effective bow, and while I held my chin up for the operation, staring blankly at the ceiling, the impression came—I wondered, was it her touch that caused it?—that something in her trembled. Shrinking perhaps is the truer word. Nothing in her face or manner betrayed it, nor in her pleasant easy talk while she tidied my things and scolded my slovenly packing, as her habit was, questioning me about the servants at the flat. The blouses, though right, were crumpled, and my scolding was deserved. There was no impatience even. Yet somehow or other the suggestion of a shrinking reserve and holding back reached my mind. She had been lonely, of course, but it was more than that; she was glad that I had come, yet for some reason unstated she could have wished that I had stayed away. We discussed the news that had accumulated during our brief separation, and in doing so the impression, at best exceedingly slight, was forgotten. My chamber was large and beautifully furnished; the hall and dining-room of our flat would have gone into it with a good remainder; yet it was not a place I could settle down in for work. It conveyed the idea of impermanence, making me feel transient as in a hotel bedroom. This, of course, was the fact. But some rooms convey a settled, lasting hospitality even in a hotel; this one did not; and as I was accustomed to work in the room I slept in, at least when visiting, a slight frown must have crept between my eyes.

"Mabel has fitted a work-room for you just out of the library," said the clairvoyant Frances. "No one will disturb you there, and

you'll have fifteen thousand books all catalogued within easy reach. There's a private staircase too. You can breakfast in your room and slip down in your dressing-gown if you want to." She laughed. My spirits took a turn upwards as absurdly as they had gone down.

"And how are *you*?" I asked, giving her a belated kiss. "It's jolly to be together again. I did feel rather lost without you, I'll admit."

"That's natural," she laughed. "I'm so glad."

She looked well and had country colour in her cheeks. She informed me that she was eating and sleeping well, going out for little walks with Mabel, painting bits of scenery again, and enjoying a complete change and rest; and yet, for all her brave description, the words somehow did not quite ring true. Those last words in particular did not ring true. There lay in her manner, just out of sight, I felt, this suggestion of the exact reverse—of unrest, shrinking, almost of anxiety. Certain small strings in her seemed over-tight. "Keyed-up" was the slang expression that crossed my mind. I looked rather searchingly into her face as she was telling me this.

"Only—the evenings," she added, noticing my query, yet rather avoiding my eyes, "the evenings are—well, rather heavy sometimes, and I find it difficult to keep awake."

"The strong air after London makes you drowsy," I suggested, "and you like to get early to bed."

Frances turned and looked at me for a moment steadily. "On the contrary, Bill, I dislike going to bed—here. And Mabel goes so early." She said it lightly enough, fingering the disorder upon my dressing-table in such a stupid way that I saw her mind was working in another direction altogether. She looked up suddenly with a kind of nervousness from the brush and scissors. "Billy," she said abruptly, lowering her voice, "isn't it odd, but I *hate* sleeping alone here? I can't make it out quite; I've never felt such a thing before in my life. Do you think it's all nonsense?" And she laughed, with her lips but not with her eyes; there was a note of defiance in her I failed to understand.

"Nothing a nature like yours feels strongly is nonsense, Frances," I replied soothingly.

But I, too, answered with my lips only, for another part of my mind was working elsewhere, and among uncomfortable things. A touch of bewilderment passed over me. I was not certain how best to continue. If I laughed she would tell me no more, yet if I took her too seriously the strings would tighten further. Instinctively, then, this flashed rapidly across me: that something of what she felt, I had also felt, though interpreting it differently. Vague it was, as the coming of rain or storm that announce themselves hours in advance with their

hint of faint, unsettling excitement in the air. I had been but a short hour in the house—big, comfortable, luxurious house—but had experienced this sense of being unsettled, unfixed, fluctuating—a kind of impermanence that transient lodgers in hotels must feel, but that a guest in a friend's home ought not to feel, be the visit short or long. To Frances, an impressionable woman, the feeling had come in the terms of alarm. She disliked sleeping alone, while yet she longed to sleep. The precise idea in my mind evaded capture, merely brushing through me, three-quarters out of sight; I realised only that we both felt the same thing, and that neither of us could get at it clearly. Degrees of unrest we felt, but the actual thing did not disclose itself. It did not happen.

I felt strangely at sea for a moment. Frances would interpret hesitation as endorsement, and encouragement might be the last thing that could help her.

"Sleeping in a strange house," I answered at length, "is often difficult at first, and one feels lonely. After fifteen months in our tiny flat one feels lost and uncared-for in a big house. It's an uncomfortable feeling—I know it well. And this *is* a barrack, isn't it? The masses of furniture only make it worse. One feels in storage somewhere underground—the furniture doesn't furnish. One must never yield to fancies, though—"

Frances looked away towards the windows; she seemed disappointed a little.

"After our thickly-populated Chelsea," I went on quickly, "it seems isolated here."

But she did not turn back, and clearly I was saying the wrong thing. A wave of pity rushed suddenly over me. Was she really frightened perhaps? She was imaginative, I knew, but never moody; common sense was strong in her, though she had her times of hypersensitiveness. I caught the echo of some unreasoning, big alarm in her. She stood there, gazing across my balcony towards the sea of wooded country that spread dim and vague in the obscurity of the dusk. The deepening shadows entered the room, I fancied, from the grounds below. Following her abstracted gaze a moment, I experienced a curious sharp desire to leave, to escape. Out yonder was winn and space and freedom. This enormous building was oppressive, silent, still. Great catacombs occurred to me, things beneath the ground, imprisonment and capture. I believe I even shuddered a little.

I touched her shoulder. She turned round slowly, and we looked with a certain deliberation into each other's eyes.

"Fanny," I asked, more gravely than I intended, "you are not frightened, are you? Nothing has happened, has it?"



She replied with emphasis, "Of course not! How could it—I mean, why should I?" She stammered, as though the wrong sentence flustered her a second. "It's simply—that I have this ter—this dislike of sleeping alone."

Naturally, my first thought was how easy it would be to cut our visit short. But I did not say this. Had it been a true solution, Frances would have said it for me long ago.

"Wouldn't Mabel double-up with you?" I said instead, "or give you an adjoining room, so that you could leave the door between you open? There's space enough, heaven knows."

And then, as the gong sounded in the hall below for dinner, she said, as with an effort, this thing:

"Mabel did ask me—on the third night—after I had told her. But I declined."

"You'd rather be alone than with her?" I asked, with a certain relief.

Her reply was so gravely given, a child would have known there was more behind it: "Not that; but that she did not really want it."

I had a moment's intuition and acted on it impulsively. "She feels it too, perhaps, but wishes to face it by herself—and get over it?"

My sister bowed her head, and the gesture made me realise of a sudden how grave and solemn our talk had grown, as though some portentous thing were under discussion. It had come of itself—indefinite as a gradual change of temperature. Yet neither of us knew its nature, for apparently neither of us could state it plainly. Nothing happened, even in our words.

"That *was* my impression," she said, "—that if she yields to it she encourages it. And a habit forms so easily. Just think," she added with a faint smile that was the first sign of lightness she had yet betrayed, "what a nuisance it would be—everywhere—if everybody was afraid of being alone—like that."

I snatched readily at the chance. We laughed a little, though it was a quiet kind of laughter that seemed wrong. I took her arm and led her towards the door.

"Disastrous, in fact," I agreed.

She raised her voice to its normal pitch again, as I had done. "No doubt it will pass," she said, "now that you have come. Of course, it's chiefly my imagination." Her tone was lighter, though nothing could convince me that the matter itself was light—just then. "And in any case," tightening her grip on my arm as we passed into the bright enormous corridor and caught sight of Mrs. Franklyn waiting in the cheerless hall below, "I'm *very* glad you're here, Bill, and Mabel, I know, is too."

"If it doesn't pass," I just had time to whisper with a feeble attempt

at jollity, "I'll come at night and snore outside your door. After that you'll be so glad to get rid of me that you won't mind being alone."

"That's a bargain," said Frances.

I shook my hostess by the hand, made a banal remark about the long interval since last we met, and walked behind them into the great dining-room, dimly lit by candles wondering in my heart how long my sister and I should stay, and why in the world we had ever left our cosy little flat to enter this desolation of riches and false luxury at all. The unsightly picture of the late Samuel Franklyn, Esq., stared down upon me from the farther end of the room above the mighty mantelpiece. He looked, I thought, like some pompous Heavenly Butler who denied to all the world, and to us in particular, the right of entry without presentation cards signed by his hand as proof that we belonged to his own exclusive set. The majority, to his deep grief, and in spite of all his prayers on their behalf, must burn and "perish everlastingly."

## 4

With the instinct of the healthy bachelor I always try to make myself a nest in the place I live in, be it for long or short. Whether visiting, in lodging-house, or in hotel, the first essential is this nest—one's own things built into the walls as a bird builds in its feathers. It may look desolate and uncomfortable enough to others, because the central detail is neither bed nor wardrobe, sofa, nor armchair, but a good solid writing-table that does not wriggle, and that has wide elbow-room. And The Towers is vividly described for me by the single fact that I could not "nest" there. I took several days to discover this, but the first impression of impermanence was truer than I knew. The feathers of the mind refused here to lie one way. They ruffled, pointed and grew wild.

Luxurious furniture does not mean comfort; I might as well have tried to settle down in the sofa and armchair department of a big shop. My bedroom was easily managed; it was the private workroom, prepared especially for my reception, that made me feel alien and outcast. Externally, it was all one could desire: an ante-chamber to the great library, with not one, but two generous oak tables, to say nothing of smaller ones against the walls with capacious drawers. There were reading-desks, mechanical devices for holding books, perfect light, quiet as in a church, and no approach but across the

huge adjoining room. Yet it did not invite.

"I hope you'll be able to work here," said my little hostess the next morning, as she took me in—her only visit to it while I stayed in the house—and showed me the ten-volume Catalogue. "It's absolutely quiet and no one will disturb you."

"If you can't, Bill, you're not much good," laughed Frances, who was on her arm. "Even I could write in a study like this!"

I glanced with pleasure at the ample tables, the sheets of thick blotting-paper, the rulers, sealing-wax, paper-knives, and all the immaculate paraphernalia. "It's perfect," I answered with a secret thrill, yet feeling a little foolish. This was for Gibbon or Carlyle, rather than for my pot-boiling insignificancies. "If I can't write master-pieces here, it's certainly *not your* fault," and I turned with gratitude to Mrs. Franklyn. She was looking straight at me, and there was a question in her small pale eyes I did not understand. Was she noting the effect upon me, I wondered?

"You'll write here—perhaps a story about the house," she said. "Thompson will bring you anything you want; you only have to ring." She pointed to the electric bell on the central table, the wire running neatly down the leg. "No one has ever worked here before, and the library has been hardly used since it was put in. So there's no previous atmosphere to affect your imagination—er—adversely."

We laughed. "Bill isn't that sort," said my sister; while I wished they would go out and leave me to arrange my little nest and set to work.

I thought, of course, it was the huge listening library that made me feel so inconsiderable—the fifteen thousand *silent, staring* books, the solemn aisles, the deep, eloquent shelves. But when the women had gone and I was alone, the beginning of the truth crept over me, and I felt that first hint of disconsolateness which later became an imperative No. The mind shut down, images ceased to rise and flow. I read, made copious notes, but I wrote no single line at The Towers. Nothing completed itself there. Nothing happened.

The morning sunshine poured into the library through ten long narrow windows; birds were singing; the autumn air, rich with a faint aroma of November melancholy that stung the imagination pleasantly, filled my ante-chamber. I looked out upon the undulating wooded landscape, hemmed in by the sweep of distant Downs, and I tasted a whiff of the sea. Rooks cawed as they floated above the elms, and there were lazy cows in the nearer meadows. A dozen times I tried to make my nest and settle down to work, and a dozen times, like a turning fastidious dog upon a hearth-rug, I rearranged my chair and books and papers. The temptation of the Catalogue and shelves,

of course, was accountable for much, yet not, I felt, for all. That was a manageable seduction. My work, moreover, was not of the creative kind that requires absolute absorption; it was the mere readable presentation of data I had accumulated. My note-books were charged with facts ready to tabulate—facts, too, that interested me keenly. A mere effort of the will was necessary, and concentration of no difficult kind. Yet, somehow, it seemed beyond me: something for ever pushed the facts into disorder . . . and in the end I sat in the sunshine, dipping into a dozen books selected from the shelves outside, vexed with myself and only half-enjoying it. I felt restless. I wanted to be elsewhere.

And even while I read, attention wandered. Frances, Mabel, her late husband, the house and grounds, each in turn and sometimes all together, rose uninvited into the stream of thought, hindering any consecutive flow of work. In disconnected fashion came these pictures that interrupted concentration, yet presenting themselves as broken fragments of a bigger thing my mind already groped for unconsciously. They fluttered round this hidden thing of which they were aspects, fugitive interpretations, no one of them bringing complete revelation. There was no adjective such as pleasant or unpleasant, that I could attach to what I felt, beyond that the result was unsettling. Vague as the atmosphere of a dream, it yet persisted, and I could not dissipate it. Isolated words or phrases in the lines I read sent questions scouring across my mind, sure sign that the deeper part of me was restless and ill at ease.

Rather trivial questions too-half-foolish interrogations, as of a puzzled or curious child: Why was my sister afraid to sleep alone, and why did her friend feel a similar repugnance, yet seek to conquer it? Why was the solid luxury of the house without comfort, its shelter without the sense of permanence? Why had Mrs. Franklyn asked *us* to come, artists, unbelieving vagabonds, types at the farthest possible remove from the saved sheep of her husband's household? Had a reaction set in against the hysteria of her conversion? I had seen no signs of religious fervour in her; her atmosphere was that of an ordinary, high-minded woman, yet a woman of the world. Lifeless, though, a little, perhaps, now that I came to think about it: she had made no definite impression upon me of any kind. And my thoughts ran vaguely after this fragile clue.

Closing my book, I let them run. For, with this chance reflection came the discovery that I could not *see* her clearly—could not feel her soul, her personality. Her face, her small pale eyes, her dress and body and walk, all these stood before me like a photograph; but her Self evaded me. She seemed not there, lifeless, empty, a shadow—

nothing. The picture was disagreeable, and I put it by. Instantly she melted out, as though light thought had conjured up a phantom that had no real existence. And at that very moment, singularly enough, my eye caught sight of her moving past the window, going silently along the gravel path. I watched her, a sudden new sensation gripping me. "There goes a prisoner," my thought instantly ran, "one who wishes to escape, but cannot."

What brought the outlandish notion, heaven only knows. The house was of her own choice; she was twice an heiress, and the world lay open at her feet. Yet she stayed—unhappy, frightened, caught. All this flashed over me, and made a sharp impression even before I had time to dismiss it as absurd. But a moment later explanation offered itself, though it seemed as far-fetched as the original impression. My mind, being logical, was obliged to provide something, apparently. For Mrs. Franklyn, while dressed to go out, with thick walking-boots, a pointed stick, and a motor-cap tied on with a veil as for the windy lanes, was obviously content to go no farther than the little garden paths. The costume was a sham and a pretence. It was this, and her lithe, quick movements that suggested a caged creature—a creature tamed by fear and cruelty that cloaked themselves in kindness—pacing up and down, unable to realise why it got no farther, but always met the same bars in exactly the same place. The mind in her was barred.

I watched her go along the paths and down the steps from one terrace to another, until the laurels hid her altogether; and into this mere imagining of a moment came a hint of something slightly disagreeable, for which my mind, search as it would, found no explanation at all. I remembered then certain other little things. They dropped into the picture of their own accord. In a mind not deliberately hunting for clues, pieces of a puzzle sometimes come together in this way, bringing revelation, so that for a second there flashed across me, vanishing instantly again before I could consider it, a large, distressing thought that I can only describe vaguely as a Shadow. Dark and ugly, oppressive certainly it might be described, with something torn and dreadful about the edges that suggested pain and strife and terror. The interior of a prison with two rows of occupied condemned cells, seen years ago in New York, sprang to memory after it—the connection between the two impossible to surmise even. But the "certain other little things" mentioned above were these: that Mrs. Franklyn, in last night's dinner talk, had always referred to "this house," but never called it "home"; and had emphasised unnecessarily, for a well-bred woman, our "great kindness" in coming down to stay so long with her. Another time, in answer to my futile compliment about the "stately rooms," she said quietly, "It is an enormous house for

so small a party; but I stay here very little, and only till I get it straight again." The three of us were going up the great staircase to bed as this was said, and, not knowing quite her meaning, I dropped the subject. It edged delicate ground, I felt. Frances added no word of her own. It now occurred to me abruptly that "stay" was the word made use of, when "live" would have been more natural. How insignificant to recall! Yet why did they suggest themselves just at this moment? . . . And, on going to Frances's room to make sure she was not nervous or lonely, I realised abruptly, that Mrs. Franklyn, of course, had talked with *her* in a confidential sense that I, as a mere visiting brother, could not share. Frances had told me nothing. I might easily have wormed it out of her, had I not felt that for us to discuss further our hostess and her house merely because we were under the roof together, was not quite nice or loyal . . .

"I'll call you, Bill, if I'm scared," she had laughed as we parted, my room being just across the big corridor from her own. I had fallen asleep, thinking what in the world was meant by "getting it straight again."

And now in my ante-chamber to the library, on the second morning, sitting among piles of foolscap and sheets of spotless blotting-paper, all useless to me, these slight hints came back and helped to frame the big, vague Shadow I have mentioned. Up to the neck in this Shadow, almost drowned, yet just treading water, stood a figure of my hostess in her walking costume. Frances and I seemed swimming to her aid. The Shadow was large enough to include both house and grounds, but farther than that I could not see . . . Dismissing it, I fell to reading my purloined book again. Before I turned another page, however, another startling detail leaped out at me: the figure of Mrs. Franklyn in the Shadow was not living. It floated helplessly, like a doll or puppet that has no life in it. It was both pathetic and dreadful.

Any one who sits in reverie thus, of course, may see similar ridiculous pictures when the will no longer guides construction. The incongruities of dreams are thus explained. I merely record the picture as it came. That it remained by me for several days, just as vivid dreams do, is neither here nor there. I did not allow myself to dwell upon it. The curious thing, perhaps, is that from this moment I date my inclination, though not yet my desire, to leave. I purposely say "to leave." I cannot quite remember when the word changed to that aggressive, frantic thing which is escape.

## 5

We were left delightfully to ourselves in this pretentious country mansion with the soul of a villa. Frances took up her painting again, and, the weather being propitious, spent hours out of doors, sketching flowers, trees and nooks of woodland, garden, even the house itself where bits of it peered suggestively across the orchards. Mrs. Franklyn seemed always busy about something or other, and never interfered with us except to propose motoring, tea in another part of the lawn, and so forth. She flitted everywhere, preoccupied, yet apparently doing nothing. The house engulfed her rather. No visitors called. For one thing, she was not supposed to be back from abroad yet; and for another, I think, the neighbourhood—her husband's neighbourhood—was puzzled by her sudden cessation from good works. Brigades and temperance societies did not ask to hold their meetings in the big hall, and the vicar arranged the school-treats in another's field without explanation. The full-length portrait in the dining-room, and the presence of the housekeeper with the "burnt" back-hair, indeed, were the only reminders of the man who once had lived here. Mrs. Marsh retained her place in silence, well-paid sinecure as it doubtless was, yet with hint of that suppressed disapproval one might have expected from her. Indeed there was nothing positive to disapprove, since nothing "worldly" entered grounds or building. In her master's life-time she had been another "brand snatched from the burning," and it had then been her custom to give vociferous "testimony" at the revival conscious of the Shadow, and that far away out of sight lay the cause of it that left me with a vague unrest, unsettled, seeking to "nest" in a place that did not want me. Only when this deeper part knows harmony, perhaps, can good brain work result, and my inability to write was thus explained. Certainly, I was always seeking for something here I could not find—an explanation that continually evaded me. Nothing but these trivial hints offered themselves. Lumped together, however, they had the effect of defining the Shadow a little. I became more and more aware of its very real existence. And, if I have made little mention of Frances and my hostess in this connection, it is because they contributed at first little or nothing towards the discovery of what this story tries to tell. Our life was wholly external, normal, quiet, and uneventful; conversation banal—Mrs. Franklyn's conversation in particular. They said nothing that suggested revelation. Both were in this Shadow, and both knew that they were in it, but neither betrayed by word nor act a hint of interpretation. They talked privately, no doubt, but of that

I can report no details.

And so it was that, after ten days of a very common-place visit, I found myself looking straight into the face of a Strangeness that defied capture at close quarters. "There's something here that never happens," were the words that rose in my mind, "and that's why none of us can speak of it." And as I looked out of the window and watched the vulgar blackbirds, with toes turned in, boring out their worms, I realised sharply that even they, as indeed every-thing large and small in the house and grounds, shared this strangeness, and were twisted out of normal appearance because of it. Life, as expressed in the entire place, was crumpled, dwarfed, emasculated. God's meanings here were crippled, His love of joy was stunted. Nothing in the garden danced or sang. There was hate in it. "The Shadow," my thought hurried on to completion, "is a manifestation of hate; and hate is the Devil." And then I sat back frightened in my chair, for I knew that I had partly found the truth.

Leaving my books I went out into the open. The sky was overcast, yet the day by no means gloomy, for a soft, diffused light oozed through the clouds and turned all things warm and almost summery. But I saw the grounds now in their nakedness because I understood. Hate means strife, and the two together weave the robe that terror wears. Having no so-called religious beliefs myself, nor belonging to any set of dogmas called a creed, I could stand outside these feelings and observe. Yet they soaked into me sufficiently for me to grasp sympathetically what others, with more cabined souls (I flattered myself), might feel. That picture in the dining-room stalked everywhere, hid behind every tree, peered down upon me from the peaked ugliness of the bourgeois towers, and left the impress of its powerful hand upon every bed of flowers. "You must not do this, you must not do that," went past me through the air. "You must not leave these narrow paths," said the rigid iron railings of black. "You shall not walk here," was written on the lawns. "Keep to the steps," "Don't pick the flowers; make no noise of laughter, singing, dancing," was placarded all over the rose-garden, and "Trespassers will be-not prosecuted but-destroyed" hung from the crest of monkey-tree and holly. Guarding the ends of each artificial terrace stood gaunt, implacable policemen, warders, gaolers. "Come with us," they chanted, "or be damned eternally."

I remember feeling quite pleased with myself that I had discovered this obvious explanation of the prison-feeling the place breathed out. That the posthumous influence of heavy old Samuel Franklyn might be an inadequate solution did not occur to me. By "getting the place straight again," his widow, of course, meant forgetting the glamour



of fear and foreboding his depressing creed had temporarily forced upon her; and Frances, delicately-minded being, did not speak of it because it was the influence of the man her friend had loved. I felt lighter; a load was lifted from me. "To trace the unfamiliar to the familiar", came back a sentence I had read somewhere, "is to understand." It was a real relief. I could take with Frances now, even with my hostess, no danger of treading clumsily. For the key was in my hands. I might even help to dissipate the Shadow, "to get it straight again." It seemed, perhaps, our long invitation was explained!

I went into the house laughing—at myself a little. "Perhaps after all the artist's outlook, with no hard and fast dogmas, is as narrow as the others! How small humanity is! And why is there no possible and true combination of *all* outlooks?"

The feeling of "unsettling" was very strong in me just then, in spite of my big discovery which was to clear everything up. And at that moment I ran into Frances on the stairs, with a portfolio of sketches under her arm.

It came across me then abruptly that, although she had worked a great deal since we came, she had shown me nothing. It struck me suddenly as odd, *unnatural*. The way she tried to pass me now confirmed my new-born suspicion that—well, that her results were hardly what they ought to be.

"Stand and deliver!" I laughed, stepping in front of her. "I've seen nothing you've done since you've been here, and as a rule you show me all your things. I believe they are atrocious and degrading!" Then my laughter froze.

She made a sly gesture to slip past me, and I almost decided to let her go, for the expression that flashed across her face shocked me. She looked uncomfortable and ashamed; the colour came and went a moment in her cheeks, making me think of a child detected in some secret naughtiness. It was almost fear.

"It's because they're not finished then?" I said, dropping the tone of banter, "or because they're too good for me to understand?" For my criticism of painting she told me, was crude and ignorant sometimes. "But you'll let me see them later, won't you?"

Frances, however, did not take the way of escape I offered. She changed her mind. She drew the portfolio from beneath her arm instead. "You can see them if you *really* want to, Bill," she said quietly, and her tone reminded me of a nurse who says to a boy just grown out of childhood, "you are old enough now to look upon horror and ugliness—only I don't advise it."

"I do want to," I said, and made to go downstairs with her. But, instead, she said in the same low voice as before, "Come up to my

room, we shall be undisturbed there." So I guessed that she had been on her way to show the paintings to our hostess, but did not care for us all three to see them together. My mind worked furiously.

"Mabel asked me to do them," she explained in a tone of submissive horror, once the door was shut, "in fact, she begged it of me. You know how persistent she is in her quiet way. I—er—had to."

She flushed and opened the portfolio on the little table by the window, standing behind me as I turned the sketches over—sketches of the grounds and trees and garden. In the first moment of inspection, however, I did not take in clearly why my sister's sense of modesty had been offended. For my attention flashed a second elsewhere. Another bit of the puzzle had dropped into place, defining still further the nature of what I called "the Shadow." Mrs. Franklyn, I now remembered, had suggested to me in the library that I might perhaps write something about the place, and I had taken it for one of her banal sentences and paid no further attention. I realised now that it was said in earnest. She wanted our interpretations, as expressed in our respective "talents," painting and writing. Her invitation *was* explained. She left us to ourselves on purpose.

"I should like to tear them up," Frances was whispering behind me with a shudder, "only I promised—" She hesitated a moment.

"Promised not to?" I asked with a queer feeling of distress, my eyes glued to the papers.

"Promised always to show them to her first," she finished so low I barely caught it.

I have no intuitive, immediate grasp of the value of paintings; results come to me slowly, and though every one believes his own judgment to be good, I dare not claim that mine is worth more than that of any other layman. Frances had too often convicted me of gross ignorance and error. I can only say that I examined these sketches with a feeling of amazement that contained revulsion, if not actually horror and disgust. They were outrageous. I felt hot for my sister, and it was a relief to know she had moved across the room on some pretence or other, and did not examine them with me. Her talent, of course, is mediocre, yet she has her moments of inspiration—moments that is to say, when a view of Beauty not normally her own flames divinely through her. And these interpretations struck me forcibly as being thus "inspired"—not her own. They were uncommonly well done; they were also atrocious. The meaning in them, however, was never more than hinted. There the unholy skill and power came in: they suggested so abominably, leaving most to the imagination. To find such significance in a bourgeois villa garden, and to interpret it with such delicate yet legible certainty, was a kind of sym-

bolism that was sinister, even diabolical. The delicacy was her own, but the point of view was another's. And the word that rose in my mind was not the gross description of "impure," but the more fundamental qualification—"unpure."

In silence I turned the sketches over one by one, as a boy hurries through the pages of an evil book lest he be caught.

"What does Mabel do with them?" I asked presently in a low tone, as I neared the end. "Does she keep them?"

"She make notes about them in a book and then destroys them," was the reply from the end of the room. I heard a sigh of relief. "I'm glad you've seen them, Bill. I wanted you to—but was afraid to show them. You understand?"

"I understand," was my reply, though it was not a question intended to be answered. All I understood really was that Mabel's mind was as sweet and pure as my sister's, and that she had some good reason for what she did. She destroyed the sketches, but first made notes! It was an interpretation of the place she sought. Brother-like, I felt resentment, though, that Frances should waste her time and talent, when she might be doing work that she could sell. Naturally, I felt other things as well . . .

"Mabel pays me five guineas for each one," I heard. "Absolutely insists."

I stared at her stupidly a moment, bereft of speech or wit.

"I must either accept, or go away," she went on calmly, but a little white. "I've tried everything. There was a scene the third day I was here—when I showed her my first result. I wanted to write to you, but hesitated—"

"It's unintentional, then, on your part—forgive my asking it, Frances, dear?" I blundered, hardly knowing what to think or say. "Between the lines" of her letter came back to me. "I mean you make the sketches in your ordinary way and—the result comes out of itself, so to speak?"

She nodded, throwing her hands out like a Frenchman. "We needn't keep the money for ourselves, Bill. We can give it away, but—I must either accept or leave," and she repeated the shrugging gesture. She sat down on the chair facing me, staring helplessly at the carpet.

"You say there was a scene?" I went on presently. "She insisted?"

"She begged me to continue," my sister replied very quietly. "She thinks—that is, she has an idea or theory that there's something about the place—something she can't get at quite." Frances stammered badly. She knew I did not encourage her wild theories.

"Something she feels—yes," I helped her, more than curious.

"Oh, you know what I mean, Bill," she said desperately. "That

the place is saturated with some influence that she is herself too positive or too stupid to interpret. She's trying to make herself negative and receptive, as she calls it, but can't, of course, succeed. Haven't you noticed how dull and impersonal and insipid she seems, as though she had no personality? She thinks impressions will come to her that way. But they don't--"

"Naturally."

"So she's trying me--us--what she calls the sensitive and impressionable artistic temperament. She says that until she is sure exactly what this influence is, she can't fight it, turn it out, 'get the house straight,' as she phrases it."

Remembering my own singular impressions, I felt more lenient than I might otherwise have done. I tried to keep impatience out of my voice.

"And this influence, what--whose it is?"

We used the pronoun that followed in the same breath, for I answered my own questions at the same moment, as she did:

"*His*." Our heads nodded involuntarily towards the floor, the dining-room being directly underneath.

And my heart sank, my curiosity died away on the instant, I felt bored. A commonplace haunted house was the last thing in the world to amuse or interest me. The mere thought exasperated, with its suggestions of imagination, overwrought nerves, hysteria, and the rest. Mingled with my other feelings was certainly disappointment. To see a figure or feel a "presence," and report from day to day strange incidents to each other would be a form of weariness I could never tolerate.

"But really, Frances," I said firmly, after a moment's pause, "it's too far-fetched, this explanation. A curse, you know, belongs to the ghost stories of early Victorian days." And only my positive conviction that there *was* something after all worth discovering, and that it most certainly was *not* this, prevented my suggesting that we terminate our visit forthwith, or as soon as we decently could. "This is not a haunted house, whatever it is," I concluded somewhat vehemently, bringing my hand down upon her odious portfolio.

My sister's reply revived my curiosity sharply.

"I was waiting for you to say that. Mabel says exactly the same. *He* is in it--but it's something more than that alone, something far bigger and more complicated." Her sentence seemed to indicate the sketches, and though I caught the inference I did not take it up, having no desire to discuss them with her just then, indeed, if ever.

I merely stared at her and listened. Questions, I felt sure, would be of little use. It was better she should say her thought in her own

way.

"He is one influence, the most recent," she went on slowly, and always very calmly, "but there are others—deeper layers, as it were—underneath. If his were the only one, something would happen. But nothing ever does happen. The others hinder and prevent—as though each were struggling to predominate."

I had felt it already myself. The idea was rather horrible. I shivered.

"That's what is so ugly about it—that nothing ever happens," she said. "There is this endless anticipation—always on the dry edge of a result that never materialises. It is torture. Mabel is at her wits' end, you see. And when she begged me—what I felt about my sketches—I mean—" She stammered badly as before.

I stopped her. I had judged too hastily. That queer symbolism in her paintings, pagan and yet not innocent, was, I understood, the result of mixture. I did not pretend to understand, but at least I could be patient. I consequently held my peace. We did talk on a little longer, but it was more general talk that avoided successfully our hostess, the paintings, wild theories, and *him*—until at length the emotion Frances had hitherto so successfully kept under burst vehemently forth again. It had hidden between her calm sentences, as it had hidden between the lines of her letter. It swept her now from head to foot, packed tight in the thing she then said.

"Then, Bill, if it is not an ordinary haunted house," she asked, "*what is it?*"

The words were commonplace enough. The emotion was in the tone of her voice that trembled; in the gesture she made, leaning forward and clasping both hands upon her knees, and in the slight blanching of her cheeks as her brave eyes asked the question and searched my own with anxiety that bordered upon panic. In that moment she put herself under my protection. I winced.

"And why," she added, lowering her voice to a still and furtive whisper, "does nothing ever happen? If only," this with great emphasis—"something *would* happen—break this awful tension—bring relief. It's the waiting I cannot stand." And she shivered all over as she said it, a touch of wildness in her eyes.

I would have given much to have made a true and satisfactory answer. My mind searched frantically for a moment, but in vain. There lay no sufficient answer in me. I felt what she felt, though with differences. No conclusive explanation lay within reach. Nothing happened. Eager as I was to shoot the entire business into a rubbish heap where ignorance and superstition discharge their poisonous weeds, I could not honestly accomplish this. To treat Frances as a child, and merely "explain away" would be to strain her confidence

in my protection, so affectionately claimed. It would further be dishonest to myself—weak, besides—to deny that I had also felt the strain and tension even as she did. While my mind continued searching, I returned her stare in silence, and Frances then, with more honesty and insight than my own, gave suddenly the answer herself—an answer whose truth and adequacy, so far as they went, I could not readily gainsay:

“I think Bill, because it is too big to happen here—to happen anywhere, indeed, all at once—and too awful!”

To have tossed the sentence aside as nonsense, argued it away, proved that it was really meaningless, would have been easy—at any other time or in any other place; and, had the past week brought me none of the vivid impressions it had brought me, this is doubtless what I should have done. My narrowness again was proved. We understand in others only what we have in ourselves. But her explanation, in a measure, I knew was true. It hinted at the strife and struggle that my notion of a Shadow had seemed to cover thinly.

“Perhaps,” I murmured lamely, waiting in vain for her to say more. “But you said just now that you felt the thing was ‘in layers,’ as it were. Do you mean each one—each influence—fighting for the upper hand?”

I used her phraseology to conceal my own poverty. Terminology, after all, was nothing, provided we could reach the idea itself.

Her eyes said yes. She had her clear conception, arrived at independently, as was her way. And, unlike her sex, she kept it clear, unsmothered by too many words.

“One set of influences gets at me, another gets at you. It’s according to our temperaments, I think.” She glanced significantly at the vile portfolio. “Sometimes they are mixed—and therefore false. There has always been in me, more than in you, the pagan thing, perhaps, though never, thank God, like *that*.”

The frank confession of course invited my own, as it was meant to do. Yet it was difficult to find the words.

“What I have felt in this place, Frances, I honestly can hardly tell you, because—er—my impressions have not arranged themselves in any definite form I can describe. The strife, the agony of vainly-sought escape, and the unrest—a sort of prison atmosphere—this I have felt at different times and with varying degrees of strength. But I find, as yet, no final label to attach. I couldn’t say pagan, Christian, or anything like that, I mean, as you do. As with the blind and deaf, you may have an intensification of certain senses denied to me, or even another sense altogether in embryo—”

“Perhaps,” she stopped me, anxious to keep to the point, “you

feel it as Mabel does. She feels the whole thing *complete*."

"That also is possible," I said very slowly. I was thinking behind my words. Her odd remark that it was "big and awful" came back upon me as true. A vast sensation of distress and discomfort swept me suddenly. Pity was in it, and a fierce contempt, a savage, bitter anger as well. Fury against some sham authority was part of it.

"Frances," I said, caught unawares, and dropping all pretence, "what in the world can it be?" I looked hard at her. For some minutes neither of us spoke.

"Have *you* felt no desire to interpret it?" she asked presently.

"Mabel did suggest my writing something about the house," was my reply, "but I've felt nothing imperative. That sort of writing is not my line, you know. My only feeling," I added, noticing that she waited for more, "is the impulse to explain, discover, get it out of me somehow, and so get rid of it. Not by writing, though—as yet." And again I repeated my former question: "What in the world do you think it is?" My voice had become involuntarily hushed. There was awe in it.

Her answer, given with slow emphasis, brought back all my reserve: the phraseology provoked me rather:—

"Whatever it is, Bill, it is not of God."

I got up to go downstairs. I believe I shrugged my shoulders. "Would you like to leave, Frances? Shall we go back to town?" I suggested this at the door, and hearing no immediate reply, I turned back to look. Frances was sitting with her head bowed over and buried in her hands. The attitude horribly suggested tears. No woman, I realised, can keep back the pressure of strong emotion as long as Frances had done, without ending in a fluid collapse. I waited a moment uneasily, longing to comfort yet afraid to act—and in this way discovered the existence of the appalling emotion in myself, hitherto but half guessed. At all costs a scene must be prevented: it would involve such exaggeration and over-statement. Brutally, such is the weakness of the ordinary man, I turned the handle to go out, but my sister then raised her head. The sunlight caught her face framed untidily in its auburn hair, and I saw her wonderful expression with a start. Pity, tenderness and sympathy shone in it like a flame. It was undeniable. There shone through all her features the imperishable love and yearning to sacrifice self for others which I have seen in only one type of human being. It was the *great mother* look.

"We must stay by Mabel and help her get it straight," she whispered, making the decision for us both.

I murmured agreement. Abashed and half ashamed, I stole softly

from the room and went out into the grounds. And the first thing clearly realised when alone was this: that the long scene between us was without definite result. The exchange of confidence was really nothing but hints and vague suggestion. We had decided to stay, but it was a negative decision not to leave rather than a positive action. All our words and questions, our guesses, inferences, explanations, our most subtle allusions and insinuations, even the odious paintings themselves, were without definite result. Nothing had happened.

## 6

And instinctively, once alone, I made for the places where she had painted her extraordinary pictures; I tried to see what she had seen. Perhaps, now that she had opened my mind to another view, I should be sensitive to some similar interpretation—and possibly by way of literary expression. If I were to write about the place, I asked myself, how should I treat it? I deliberately invited an interpretation in the way that came easiest to me—writing.

But in this case there came no such revelation. Looking closely at the trees and flowers, the bits of lawn and terrace, the rose-garden and corner of the house where the flaming creeper hung so thickly, I discovered nothing of the odious, unpure thing her colour and grouping had unconsciously revealed. At first, that is, I discovered nothing. The reality stood there, commonplace and ugly, side by side with her distorted version of it that lay in my mind. It seemed incredible. I tried to force it, but in vain. My imagination, ploughed less deeply than hers, or to another pattern, grew different seed. Where I saw the gross soul of an overgrown suburban garden, inspired by the spirit of a vulgar, rich revivalist who loved to preach damnation, she saw this rush of pagan liberty and joy, this strange licence of primitive flesh which, tainted by the other, produced the adulterated, vile result.

Certain things, however, gradually then became apparent, forcing themselves upon me, willy nilly. They came slowly, but overwhelmingly. Not that facts had changed, or natural details altered in the grounds—this was impossible—but that I noticed for the first time various aspects I had not noticed before—trivial enough, yet for me, just then, significant. Some I remembered from previous days; others I saw now as I wandered to and fro, uneasy, uncomfortable—almost, it seemed, watched by some one who took note of my impressions. The details were so foolish, the total result so formidable. I was half



aware that others tried hard to make me see. It was deliberate. My sister's phrase, "one layer got at me, another gets at you," flashed, undesired, upon me.

For I saw, as with the eyes of a child, what I can only call a goblin garden—house, grounds, trees, and flowers belonged to a goblin world that children enter through the pages of their fairy tales. And what made me first aware of it was the whisper of the wind behind me, so that I turned with a sudden start, feeling that something had moved closer. An old ash tree, ugly and ungainly, had been artificially trained to form an arbour at one end of the terrace that was a tennis lawn, and the leaves of it now went rustling together, swishing as they rose and fell. I looked at the ash tree, and felt as though I had passed that moment between doors into this goblin garden that crouched behind the real one. Below, at a deeper layer perhaps, lay hidden the one my sister had entered.

To deal with my own, however, I call it goblin, because an odd aspect of the quaint in it yet never quite achieved the picturesque. Grotesque, probably, is the truer word, for everywhere I noticed, and for the first time, this slight alteration of the natural due either to the exaggeration of some detail, or to its suppression, generally, I think, to the latter. Life everywhere appeared to me as blocked from the full delivery of its sweet and lovely message. Some counter influence stopped it—suppression; or sent it awry—exaggeration. The house itself, mere expression, of course, of a narrow, limited mind, was sheer ugliness; it required no further explanation. With the grounds and garden, so far as shape and general plan were concerned, this was also true; but that trees and flowers and other natural details should share the same deficiency perplexed my logical soul, and even dismayed it. I stood and stared, then moved about, and stood and stared again. Everywhere was this mockery of a sinister, unfinished aspect. I sought in vain to recover my normal point of view. My mind had found this goblin garden and wandered to and fro in it, unable to escape.

The change was in myself, of course, and so trivial were the details which illustrated it, that they sound absurd, thus mentioned one by one. For me, they proved it, is all I can affirm. The goblin touch lay plainly everywhere: in the forms of the trees, planted at neat intervals along the lawns; in this twisted ash that rustled just behind me; in the shadow of the gloomy wellingtonias, whose sweeping skirts obscured the grass; but especially, I noticed, in the tops and crests of them. For here, the delicate, graceful curves of last year's growth seemed to shrink back into themselves. None of them pointed upwards. Their life had failed and turned aside just when it should

have become triumphant. The character of a tree reveals itself chiefly at the extremities, and it was precisely here that they all drooped and achieved this hint of goblin distortion—in the growth, that is, of the last few years. What ought to have been fairy, joyful, natural, was instead uncomely to the verge of the grotesque. Spontaneous expression was arrested. My mind perceived a goblin garden, and was caught in it. The place grimaced at me.

With the flowers it was similar, though far more difficult to detect in detail for description. I saw the smaller vegetable growth as impish, half-malicious. Even the terraces sloped ill, as though their ends had sagged since they had been so lavishly constructed; their varying angles gave a queerly bewildering aspect to their sequence that was unpleasant to the eye. One might wander among their deceptive lengths and get lost—lost among open terraces!—with the house quite close at hand. Un-homely seemed the entire garden, unable to give repose, restlessness in it everywhere, almost strife, and discord certainly.

Moreover, the garden grew into the house, the house into the garden, and in both was this idea of resistance to the natural—the spirit that says No to joy. All over it I was aware of the effort to achieve another end, the struggle to burst forth and escape into free, spontaneous expression that should be happy and natural, yet the effort for ever frustrated by the weight of this dark shadow that rendered it abortive. Life crawled aside into a channel that was a cul-de-sac, then turned horribly upon itself. Instead of blossom and fruit, there were weeds. This approach of life I was conscious of—then dismal failure. There was no fulfilment. Nothing happened.

And so, through this singular mood, I came a little nearer to understand the unpure thing that had stammered out into expression through my sister's talent. For the unpure is merely negative; it has no existence; it is but the cramped expression of what is true, stammering its way brokenly over false boundaries that seek to limit and confine. Great, full expression of anything is pure, whereas here was only the incomplete, unfinished, and therefore ugly. There was strife and pain and desire to escape. I found myself shrinking from house and grounds as one shrinks from the touch of the mentally arrested, those in whom life has turned awry. There was almost mutilation in it.

Past items, too, now flocked to confirm this feeling that I walked, liberty captured and half-maimed, in a monstrous garden. I remembered days of rain that refreshed the countryside, but left these grounds, cracked with the summer heat, unsatisfied and thirsty; and how the big winds, that cleaned the woods and fields elsewhere, crawled here with difficulty through the dense foliage that protected

The Towers from the North and West and East. They were ineffective, sluggish currents. There was no real wind. Nothing happened. I began to realise—far more clearly than in my sister's fanciful explanation about "layers"—that here were many contrary influences at work, mutually destructive of one another. House and grounds were not haunted merely; they were the arena of past thinking and feeling, perhaps of terrible, impure beliefs, each striving to suppress the others, yet no one of them achieving supremacy because no one of them was strong enough, no one of them was true. Each, moreover, tried to win me over, though only one was able to reach my mind at all. For some obscure reason—possibly because my temperament had a natural bias towards the grotesque—it was the goblin layer. With me, it was the line of least resistance . . .

In my own thoughts this "goblin garden" revealed, of course, merely my personal interpretation. I felt now objectively what long ago my mind had felt subjectively. My work, essential sign of spontaneous life with me, had stopped dead; production had become impossible. I stood now considerably closer to the cause of this sterility. The Cause, rather, turned bolder, had stepped insolently nearer. Nothing happened anywhere; house, garden, mind alike were barren, abortive, torn by the strife of frustrate impulse, ugly, hateful, sinful. Yet behind it all was still the desire of life—desire to escape—accomplish. Hope—an intolerable hope—I became startlingly aware—crowned torture.

And, realising this, though in some part of me where Reason lost her hold, there rose upon me then another and a darker thing that caught me by the throat and made me shrink with a sense of revulsion that touched actual loathing. I knew instantly whence it came, this wave of abhorrence and disgust, for even while I saw red and felt revolt rise in me, it seemed that I grew partially aware of the layer next below the goblin. I perceived the existence of this deeper stratum. One opened the way for the other, as it were. There were so many, yet all inter-related; to admit one was to clear the way for all. If I lingered I should be caught—horribly. They struggled with such violence for supremacy among themselves, however, that this latest uprising was instantly smothered and crushed back, though not before a glimpse had been revealed to me, and the redness in my thoughts transferred itself to colour my surroundings thickly and appallingly—with blood. This lurid aspect drenched the garden, smeared the terraces, lent to the very soil a tinge as of sacrificial rites, that choked the breath in me, while it seemed to fix me to the earth my feet so longed to leave. It was so revolting that at the same time I felt a dreadful curiosity as of fascination—I wished to stay. Between

these contrary impulses I think I actually reeled a moment, transfixed by a fascination of the Awful. Through the lighter goblin veil I felt myself sinking down, down, down into this turgid layer that was so much more violent and so much more ancient. The upper layer, indeed, seemed fairy by comparison with this terror born of the lust of blood, thick with the anguish of human sacrificial victims.

*Upper!* Then I was already sinking; my feet were caught; I was actually in it! What atavistic strain, hidden deep within me, had been touched into vile response, giving this flash of intuitive comprehension, I cannot say. The coatings laid on by civilisation are probably thin enough in all of us. I made a supreme effort. The sun and wind came back. I could almost swear I opened my eyes. Something very atrocious surged back into the depths, carrying with it a thought of tangled woods, of big stones standing in a circle, motionless white figures, the one form bound with ropes, and the ghastly gleam of the knife. Like smoke upon a battlefield, it rolled away . . . .

I was standing on the gravel path below the second terrace when the familiar goblin garden danced back again, doubly grotesque now, doubly mocking, yet, by way of contrast, almost welcome. My glimpse into the depths was momentary, it seems, and had passed utterly away. The common world rushed back with a sense of glad relief, yet ominous now for ever, I felt, for the knowledge of what its past had built upon. In street, in theatre, in the festivities of friends, in music-room or playing-field, even indeed in church—how could the memory of what I had seen and felt not leave its hideous trace? The very structure of my Thought, it seemed to me, was stained. What has been thought by others can never be obliterated until . . .

With a start my reverie broke and fled, scattered by a violent sound that I recognised for the first time in my life as wholly desirable. The returning motor meant that my hostess was back. Yet, so urgent had been my temporary obsession, that my first presentation of her was—well, not as I knew her now. Floating along with a face of anguished torture I saw Mabel, a mere effigy captured by others' thinking, pass down into those depths of fire and blood that only just had closed beneath my feet. She dipped away. She vanished, her fading eyes turned to the last towards some saviour who had failed her. And that strange intolerable hope was in her face.

The mystery of the place was pretty thick about me just then. It was the fall of dusk, and the ghost of slanting sunshine was as unreal as though badly painted. The garden stood at attention all about me. I cannot explain it, but I can tell it, I think, exactly as it happened, for it remains vivid in me for ever—that, for the first time, something *almost happened*, myself apparently the combining link through which

it pressed towards delivery:

I had already turned towards the house. In my mind were pictures—not actual thoughts—of the motor, tea on the verandah, my sister, Mabel—when there came behind me this tumultuous, awful rush—as I left the garden. The ugliness, the pain, the striving to escape, the whole negative and suppressed agony that *was* the Place, focused that second into a concentrated effort to produce a result. It was a blinding tempest of long-frustrate desire that heaved at me, surging appallingly behind me like an anguished mob. I was in the act of crossing the frontier into my normal self again, when it came, catching fearfully at my skirts. I might use an entire dictionary of descriptive adjectives yet come no nearer to it than this—the conception of a huge assemblage determined to escape with me, or to snatch me back among themselves. My legs trembled for an instant, and I caught my breath—then turned and ran as fast as possible up the ugly terraces.

At the same instant, as though the clanging of an iron gate cut short the unfinished phrase, I *thought* the beginning of an awful thing:

“The Damned . . .”

Like this it rushed after me from that goblin garden that had sought to keep me:

“The Damned!”

For there was sound in it. I know full well it was subjective, not actually heard at all; yet somehow sound was in it—a great volume, roaring and booming thunderously, far away, and below me. The sentence dipped back into the depths that gave it birth, unfinished. Its completion was prevented. As usual, nothing happened. But it drove behind me like a hurricane as I ran towards the house, and the sound of it I can only liken to those terrible undertones you may hear standing beside Niagara. They lie behind the mere crash of the falling flood, within it somehow, not audibly, but felt rather than definitely heard.

It seemed to echo back from the surface of the ugly terraces as I flew across their sloping ends, for it was somehow underneath them. It was in the rustle of the wind that stirred the skirts of the drooping wellingtonias. The beds of formal flowers passed it on to the creepers, red as blood, that crept over the unsightly building. Into the structure of the vulgar and forbidding house it sank away; The Towers took it home. The uncomely doors and windows seemed almost like mouths that had uttered the words themselves, and on the upper floors at that very moment I saw two maids in the act of closing them again.

And on the verandah, as I arrived breathless, and shaken in my soul, Frances and Mabel, standing by the tea-table, looked up to greet

me. In the faces of both were clearly legible the signs of shock. They watched me coming, yet so full of their own distress that they hardly noticed the state in which I came. In the face of my hostess, however, I read another and a bigger thing than in the face of Frances. Mabel *knew*. She had experienced what I had experienced. She had heard that awful sentence I had heard, but heard it not for the first time; heard it, moreover, I verily believe, complete and to its dreadful end.

"Bill, did you hear that curious noise just now?" Frances asked it sharply before I could say a word. Her manner was confused; she looked straight at me; and there was a tremor in her voice she could not hide.

"There's wind about," I said, "wind in the trees and sweeping round the walls. It's risen rather suddenly." My voice faltered rather.

"No. It wasn't wind," she insisted, with a significance meant for me alone, but badly hidden. "It was more like distant thunder, we thought. How you ran too!" she added. "What a pace you came across the terraces!"

I knew instantly from the way she said it that they both had already heard the sound before and were anxious to know if I had heard it, and how. My interpretation was what they sought.

"It was a curiously deep sound, I admit. It may have been big guns at sea," I suggested, "forts or cruisers practising. The coast isn't so very far, and with the wind in the right direction—"

The expression on Mabel's face stopped me dead.

"Like huge doors closing," she said softly in her colour-less voice, "enormous metal doors shutting against a mass of people clamouring to get out." The gravity, the note of hopelessness in her tones, was shocking.

Frances had gone into the house the instant Mabel began to speak. "I'm cold," she had said; "I think I'll get a shawl." Mabel and I were alone. I believe it was the first time we had been really alone since I arrived. She looked up from the teacups, fixing her pallid eyes on mine. She had made a question of the sentence.

"You hear it like that?" I asked innocently. I purposely used the present tense.

She changed her stare from one eye to the other; it was absolutely expressionless. My sister's step sounded on the floor of the room behind us.

"If only—" Mabel began, then stopped, and my own feelings leaping out instinctively completed the sentence I felt was in her mind:

"—something would happen."

She instantly corrected me. I had caught her thought, yet somehow phrased it wrongly.

"We could escape!" She lowered her tone a little, saying it hurriedly. The "we" amazed and horrified me; but something in her voice and manner struck me utterly dumb. There was ice and terror in it. It was a dying woman speaking—a lost and hopeless soul.

In that atrocious moment I hardly noticed what was said exactly, but I remember that my sister returned with a grey shawl about her shoulders, and that Mabel said, in her ordinary voice again, "It is chilly, yes; let's have tea inside," and that two maids, one of them the grenadier, speedily carried the loaded trays into the morning-room and put a match to the logs in the great open fireplace. It was, after all, foolish to risk the sharp evening air, for dusk was falling steadily, and even the sunshine of the day just fading could not turn autumn into summer. I was the last to come in. Just as I left the verandah a large black bird swooped down in front of me past the pillars; it dropped from overhead, swerved abruptly to one side as it caught sight of me, and flapped heavily towards the shrubberies on the left of the terraces, where it disappeared into the gloom. It flew very low, very close. And it startled me, I think because in some way it seemed like my Shadow materialised—as though the dark horror that was rising everywhere from house and garden, then settling back so thickly yet so imperceptibly upon us all, were incarnated in that whirring creature that passed between the daylight and the coming night.

I stood a moment, wondering if it would appear again, before I followed the others indoors, and as I was in the act of closing the windows after me, I caught a glimpse of a figure on the lawn. It was some distance away, on the other side of the shrubberies, in fact where the bird had vanished. But in spite of the twilight that half magnified, half obscured it, the identity was unmistakable. I knew the housekeeper's stiff walk too well to be deceived. "Mrs. Marsh taking the air," I said to myself. I felt the necessity of saying it, and I wondered why she was doing so at this particular hour. If I had other thoughts they were so vague, and so quickly and utterly suppressed, that I cannot recall them sufficiently to relate them here.

And, once indoors, it was to be expected that there would come explanation, discussion, conversation, at any rate, regarding the singular noise and its cause, some uttered evidence of the mood that had been strong enough to drive us all inside. Yet there was none. Each of us purposely, and with various skill, ignored it. We talked *à l'air*, and when we did it was of anything in the world but that. Personally, I experienced a touch of that same bewilderment which had come over me during my first talk with Frances on the evening of my arrival, for I recall now the acute tension, and the hope, yet dread, that one or other of us must sooner or later introduce the subject.

It did not happen, however; no reference was made to it even remotely. It was the presence of Mabel, I felt positive, that prohibited. As soon might we have discussed Death in the bedroom of a dying woman.

The only scrap of conversation I remember, where all was ordinary and commonplace, was when Mabel spoke casually to the grenadier asking why Mrs. Marsh had omitted to do something or other—what it was I forget—and that the maid replied respectfully that “Mrs. Marsh was very sorry, but her ’and still pained her.” I enquired, though so casually that I scarcely know what prompted the words, whether she had injured herself severely, and the reply, “She upset a lamp and burnt herself,” was said in a tone that made me feel my curiosity was indiscreet, “but she always has an excuse for not doing things she ought to do.” The little bit of conversation remained with me, and I remember particularly the quick way Frances interrupted and turned the talk upon the delinquencies of servants in general, telling incidents of her own at our flat with a volubility that perhaps seemed forced, and that certainly did not encourage general talk as it may have been intended to do. We lapsed into silence immediately she finished.

But for all our care and all our calculated silence, each knew that something had, in these last moments, come very close; it had brushed us in passing; it had retired; and I am inclined to think now that the large dark thing I saw, riding the dusk, probably bird of prey, was in some sense a symbol of it in my mind—that actually there had been no bird at all, I mean, but that my mood of apprehension and dismay had formed the vivid picture in my thoughts. It had swept past us, it had retreated, but it was now, at this moment, in hiding very close. And it was watching us.

Perhaps, too, it was mere coincidence that I encountered Mrs. Marsh, *his* housekeeper, several times that evening in the short interval between tea and dinner, and that on each occasion the sight of this gaunt, half-saturnine woman fed my prejudice against her. Once, on my way to the telephone, I ran into her just where the passage is somewhat jammed by a square table carrying the Chinese gong, a grandfather’s clock and a box of croquet mallets. We both gave way, then both advanced, then again gave way—simultaneously. It seemed impossible to pass. We stepped with decision to the same side, finally colliding in the middle, while saying those futile little things, half apology, half excuse, that are inevitable at such times. In the end she stood upright against the wall for me to pass, taking her place against the very door I wished to open. It was ludicrous.

“Excuse me—I was just going in—to telephone,” I explained. And



she sidled off, murmuring apologies, but opening the door for me while she did so. Our hands met a moment on the handle. There was a second's awkwardness—it was so stupid. I remembered her injury, and by way of something to say, I enquired after it. She thanked me; it was entirely healed now, but it might have been much worse; and there was something about the "mercy of the Lord" that I didn't quite catch. While telephoning, however—a London call, and my attention focused on it—I realised sharply that this was the first time I had spoken with her; also, that I had—touched her.

It happened to be a Sunday, and the lines were clear. I got my connection quickly, and the incident was forgotten while my thoughts went up to London. On my way upstairs, then, the woman came back into my mind, so that I recalled other things about her—how she seemed all over the house, in unlikely places often; how I had caught her sitting in the hall alone that night; how she was for ever coming and going with her lugubrious visage and that untidy hair at the back that had made me laugh three years ago with the idea that it looked singed or burnt; and how the impression on my first arrival at The Towers was that this woman somehow kept alive, though its evidence was outwardly suppressed, the influence of her late employer and of his sombre teachings. Somewhere with her was associated the idea of punishment, vindictiveness, revenge. I remembered again suddenly my odd notion that she sought to keep her present mistress here, a prisoner in this bleak and comfortless house, and that really, in spite of her obsequious silence, she was intensely opposed to the change of thought that had reclaimed Mabel to a happier view of life.

All this in a passing second flashed in review before me, and I discovered, or at any rate reconstructed, the real Mrs. Marsh. She was decidedly in the Shadow. More, she stood in the forefront of it, stealthily leading an assault, as it were, against The Towers and its occupants, as though, consciously or unconsciously, she laboured incessantly to this hateful end.

I can only judge that some state of nervousness in me permitted the series of insignificant thoughts to assume this dramatic shape, and that what had gone before prepared the way and led her up at the head of so formidable a procession. I relate it exactly as it came to me. My nerves were doubtless somewhat on edge by now. Otherwise I should hardly have been a prey to the exaggeration at all. I seemed open to so many strange impressions.

Nothing else, perhaps, can explain my ridiculous conversation with her, when, for the third time that evening, I came suddenly upon the woman half-way down the stairs, standing by an open window as if in the act of listening. She was dressed in black, a black shawl

over her square shoulders and black gloves on her big, broad hands. Two black objects, prayer-books apparently, she clasped, and on her head she wore a bonnet with shaking beads of jet. At first I did not know her, as I came running down upon her from the landing; it was only when she stood aside to let me pass that I saw her profile against the tapestry and recognised Mrs. Marsh. And to catch her on the front stairs, dressed like this, struck me as incongruous-impertinent. I paused in my dangerous descent. Through the opened window came the sound of bells-church bells-a sound more depressing to me than superstition, and as nauseating. Though the action was ill-judged, I obeyed the sudden prompting-was it a secret desire to attack, perhaps?-and spoke to her.

"Been to church, I suppose, Mrs. Marsh?" I said. "Or just going, perhaps?"

Her face, as she looked up a second to reply, was like an iron doll that moved its lips and turned its eyes, but made no other imitation of life at all.

"Some of us still goes, sir," she said unctuously.

It was respectful enough, yet the implied judgment of the rest of the world made me almost angry. A deferential insolence lay behind the affected meekness.

"For those who believe no doubt it *is* helpful," I smiled. "True religion brings peace and happiness, I'm sure-joy, Mrs. Marsh, JOY!" I found keen satisfaction in the emphasis.

She looked at me like a knife. I cannot describe the implacable thing that shone in her fixed, stern eyes, nor the shadow of felt darkness that stole across her face. She glittered. I felt hate in her. I knew-she knew too-who was in the thoughts of us both at that moment.

She replied softly, never forgetting her place for an instant:

"There is joy, sir-in 'eaven-over one sinner that repenteth, and in church there goes up prayer to Gawd for those 'oo-well, for the others, sir, 'oo--"

She cut short her sentence thus. The gloom about her as she said it was like the gloom about a hearse, a tomb, a darkness of great hopeless dungeons. My tongue ran on of itself with a kind of bitter satisfaction:

"We must believe there are *no* others, Mrs. March. Salvation, you know, would be such a failure if there were. No merciful, all-foreseeing God could ever have devised such a fearful plan--"

Her voice, interrupting me, seemed to rise out of the bowels of the earth:

"They rejected the salvation when it was hofferred to them, sir, on earth."

"But you wouldn't have them tortured for ever because of one mistake in ignorance," I said, fixing her with my eye. "Come now, would you, Mrs. Marsh? No God worth worshipping could permit such cruelty. Think a moment what it means."

She stared at me, a curious expression in her stupid eyes. It seemed to me as though the "woman" in her revolted, while yet she dared not suffer her grim belief to trip. That is, she would willingly have had it otherwise but for a terror that prevented.

"We may pray for them, sir, and we do—we *may* 'ope." She dropped her eyes to the carpet.

"Good, good!" I put in cheerfully, sorry now that I had spoken at all. "That's more hopeful, at any rate, isn't it?"

She murmured something about Abraham's bosom, and the "time of salvation not being for ever," as I tried to pass her. Then a half gesture that she made stopped me. There was something more she wished to say—to ask. She looked up furtively. In her eyes I saw the "woman" peering out through fear.

"Per'aps, sir," she faltered, as though lightning must strike her dead, "per'aps, would you think, a drop of cold water, given in His name, might moisten—?"

But I stopped her, for the foolish talk had lasted long enough.

"Of course," I exclaimed, "of course. For God is love, remember, and love means charity, tolerance, sympathy, and sparing others pain," and I hurried past her, determined to end the outrageous conversation for which yet I knew myself entirely to blame. Behind me, she stood stock-still for several minutes, half bewildered, half alarmed, as I suspected. I caught the fragment of another sentence, one word of it, rather—"punishment"—but the rest escaped me. Her arrogance and condescending tolerance exasperated me, while I was at the same time secretly pleased that I might have touched some string of remorse or sympathy in her after all. Her belief was iron; she dared not let it go; yet somewhere underneath there lurked the germ of a wholesome revulsion. She would help "them"—if she dared. Her question proved it.

Half ashamed of myself, I turned and crossed the hall quickly lest I should be tempted to say more, and in me was a disagreeable sensation as though I had just left the Incurable Ward of some great hospital. A reaction caught me as of nausea. Ugh! I wanted such people cleansed by fire. They seemed to me as centres of contamination whose vicious thoughts flowed out to stain God's glorious world. I saw myself, Frances, Mabel too especially, on the rack, while that odious figure of cruelty and darkness stood over us and ordered the awful handles turned in order that we might be "saved"—forced, that

is, to think and believe exactly as *she* thought and believed.

I found relief for my somewhat childish indignation by letting myself loose upon the organ then. The flood of Bach and Beethoven brought back the sense of proportion. It proved, however, at the same time that there *had* been this growth of distortion in me, and that it had been provided apparently by my closer contact—for the first time—with that funereal personality, the woman who, like her master, believed that all holding views of God that differed from her own, must be damned eternally. It gave me, moreover, some faint clue perhaps, though a clue I was unequal to following up, to the nature of the strife and terror and frustrate influence in the house. What housekeeper had to do with it. She kept it alive. Her thought was like a spell she waved above her mistress's head.

## 7

That night I was wakened by a hurried tapping at my door, and before I could answer, Frances stood beside my bed. She had switched on the light as she came in. Her hair fell straggling over her dressing-gown. Her face was deathly pale, its expression so distraught it was almost haggard. The eyes were very wide. She looked almost like another woman.

She was whispering at a great pace: "Bill, Bill, wake up, quick!"

"I *am* awake. What is it?" I whispered too. I was startled.

"Listen!" was all she said. Her eyes stared into vacancy.

There was not a sound in the great house. The wind had dropped, and all was still. Only the tapping seemed to continue endlessly in my brain. The clock on the mantel-piece pointed to half-past two.

"I heard nothing, Frances. What is it?" I rubbed my eyes; I had been very deeply asleep.

"Listen!" she repeated very softly, holding up one finger and turning her eyes towards the door she had left ajar. Her usual calmness had deserted her. She was in the grip of some distressing terror.

For a full minute we held our breath and listened. Then her eyes rolled round again and met my own, and her skin went even whiter than before.

"It woke me," she said beneath her breath, and moving a step nearer to my bed. "It was the Noise." Even her whisper trembled.

"The Noise!" The word repeated itself dully of its own accord. I would rather it had been anything in the world but that—earthquake,

foreign cannon, collapse of the house above our heads! "The noise, Frances! Are you *sure*?" I was playing really for a little time.

"It was like thunder. At first I thought it *was* thunder. But a minute later it came again—from underground. It's appalling." She muttered the words, her voice not properly under control.

There was a pause of perhaps a minute, and then we both spoke at once. We said foolish, obvious things that neither of us believed in for a second. The roof had fallen in, there were burglars downstairs, the safes had been blown open. It was to comfort each other as children do that we said these things; also it was to gain further time.

"There's some one in the house, of course," I heard my voice say finally, as I sprang out of bed and hurried into dressing-gown and slippers. "Don't be alarmed. I'll go down and see," and from the drawer I took a pistol it was my habit to carry everywhere with me. I loaded it carefully while Frances stood stock-sill beside the bed and watched. I moved towards the open door.

"You stay here, Frances," I whispered, the beating of my heart making the words uneven, "while I go down and make a search. Lock yourself in, girl. Nothing can happen to you. It was downstairs, you said?"

"Underneath," she answered faintly, pointing through the floor.

She moved suddenly between me and the door.

"Listen! Hark!" she said, the eyes in her face quite fixed; "it's coming again," and she turned her head to catch the slightest sound. I stood there watching her, and while I watched her, shook. But nothing stirred. From the halls below rose only the whirr and quiet ticking of the numerous clocks. The blind by the open window behind us flapped out a little into the room as the draught caught it.

"I'll come with you, Bill—to the next floor," she broke the silence. "Then I'll stay with Mabel—till you come up again." The blind sank down with a long sigh as she said it.

The question jumped to my lips before I could repress it:

"Mabel is awake. She heard it too?"

I hardly know why horror caught me at her answer. All was so vague and terrible as we stood there playing the great game of this sinister house where nothing ever happened.

"We met in the passage. She was on her way to me."

What shook in me, shook inwardly. Frances, I mean, did not see it. I had the feeling just then that the Noise was upon us, that any second it would boom and roar about our ears. But the deep silence held. I only heard my sister's little whisper coming across the room in answer to my question:

"Then what is Mabel doing now?"

And her reply proved that she was yielding at last beneath the dreadful tension, for she spoke at once, unable longer to keep up the pretence. With a kind of relief, as it were, she said it out, looking helplessly at me like a child:

"She is weeping and gna—"

My expression must have stopped her. I believe I clapped both hands upon her mouth, though when I realised things clearly again, I found they were covering my own ears instead. It was a moment of unutterable horror. The revulsion I felt was actually physical. It would have given me pleasure to fire off all the five chambers of my pistol into the air above my head; the sound—a definite, wholesome sound that explained itself—would have been a positive relief. Other feelings, though, were in me too, all over me, rushing to and fro. It was vain to seek their disentanglement; it was impossible. I confess that I experienced, among them, a touch of paralysing fear—though for a moment only; it passed as sharply as it came, leaving me with a violent flush of blood to the face such as bursts of anger bring, followed abruptly by an icy perspiration over the entire body. Yet I may honestly avow that it was not ordinary personal fear I felt, nor any common dread of physical injury. It was, rather, a vast, impersonal shrinking—a sympathetic shrinking—from the agony and terror that countless others, somewhere, somehow, felt for themselves. The first sensation of a prison overwhelmed me in that instant, of bitter strife and frenzied suffering, and the fiery torture of the yearning to escape that was yet hopelessly uttered . . . It was of incredible power. It was real. The vain, intolerable hope swept over me.

I mastered myself, though hardly knowing how, and took my sister's hand. It was as cold as ice, as I led her firmly to the door and out into the passage. Apparently she noticed nothing of my so near collapse, for I caught her whisper as we went. "*You are* brave, Bill; splendidly brave."

The upper corridors of the great sleeping house were brightly lit; on her way to me she had turned on every electric switch her hand could reach; and as we passed the final flight of stairs to the floor below, I heard a door shut softly and knew that Mabel had been listening—waiting for us. I led my sister up to it. She knocked, and the door was opened cautiously an inch or so. The room was pitch black. I caught no glimpse of Mabel standing there. Frances turned to me with a hurried whisper, "*Billy, you will* be careful, won't you?" and went in. I just had time to answer that I would not be long, and Frances to reply, "*You'll* find us here—" when the door closed and cut her sentence short before its end.

But it was not alone the closing door that took the final words.

Frances—by the way she disappeared I knew it—had made a swift and violent movement into the darkness that was as though she sprang. She leaped upon that other woman who stood back among the shadows, for, simultaneously with the clipping of the sentence, another sound was also stopped—stifled, smothered, choked back lest I should also hear it. Yet not in time. I heard it—a hard and horrible sound that explained both the leap and the abrupt cessation of the whispered words.

I stood irresolute a moment. It was as though all the bones had been withdrawn from my body, so that I must sink and fall. That sound plucked them out, and plucked out my self-possession with them. I am sure that it was a sound I had ever heard before, though children, I half remembered, made it sometimes in blind rages when they knew not what they did. In a grown-up person certainly I had never known it. I associated it with animals rather—horribly. In the history of the world, no doubt, it has been common enough, alas, but fortunately to-day there can be but few who know it, or would recognise it even when heard. The bones shot back into my body, *the same instant, but red-hot and burning*; the brief instant of irresolution passed; I was torn between the desire to break down the door and enter, and to run—run for my life from a thing I dared not face.

Out of the horrid tumult, then, I adopted neither course. Without reflection, certainly without analysis of what was best to do for my sister, myself or Mabel, I took up my action where I had been interrupted. I turned from the awful door and moved slowly towards the head of the stairs. But that dreadful little sound came with me. I believe my own teeth chattered. It seemed all over the house—in the empty halls that opened into the long passages towards the music-room, and even in the grounds outside the building. From the lawns and barren garden, from the ugly terraces themselves, it rose into the night, and behind it came a curious driving sound, incomplete, unfinished, as of wailing for deliverance, the wailing of desperate souls in anguish, the dull and dry beseeching of hopeless spirits in prison.

That I could have taken the little sound from the bedroom where I actually heard it, and spread it thus over the entire house and grounds, is evidence, perhaps, of the state my nerves were in. The wailing assuredly was in my mind alone. But the longer I hesitated, the more difficult became my task, and, gathering up my dressing-gown, lest I should trip in the darkness, I passed slowly down the staircase into the hall below. I carried neither candle nor matches; every switch in room and corridor was known to me. The covering of darkness was indeed rather comforting than otherwise, for if it prevented seeing, it also prevented being seen. The heavy pistol,

knocking against my thigh as I moved, made me feel I was carrying a child's toy foolishly. I experienced in every nerve that primitive vast dread which is the Thrill of darkness. Merely the child in me was comforted by that pistol.

The night was not entirely black; the iron bars across the glass front door were visible, and, equally, I discerned the big, stiff wooden chairs in the hall, the gaping fireplace, the upright pillars supporting the staircase, the round table in the centre with its books and flower-vases, and the basket that held visitors' cards. There, too, was the stick and umbrella stand and the shelf with railway guides, directory, and telegraph forms. Clocks ticked everywhere with sounds like quiet foot-falls. Light fell here and there in patches from the floor above. I stood a moment in the hall, letting my eyes grow more accustomed to the gloom, while deciding on a plan of search. I made out the ivy trailing outside over one of the big windows . . . and then the tall clock by the front door made a grating noise deep down inside its body—it was the Presentation clock, large and hideous, given by the congregation of his church—and, dreading the booming strike it seemed to threaten, I made a quick decision. If others beside myself were about in the night, the sound of that striking might cover their approach.

So I tiptoed to the right, where the passage led towards the dining-room. In the other direction were the morning and drawing-room, both little used, and various other rooms beyond that had been *his*, generally now kept locked. I thought of my sister, waiting upstairs with that frightened woman for my return. I went quickly yet stealthily.

And, to my surprise, the door of the dining-room was open. It had been opened. I paused on the threshold, staring about me. I think I fully expected to see a figure blocked in the shadows against the heavy sideboard, or looming on the other side beneath his portrait. But the room was empty; I *felt* it empty. Through the wide bow-windows that gave on to the veranda came an uncertain glimmer that even shone reflected in the polished surface of the dinner-table, and again I perceived the stiff outline of chairs, waiting tenantless all round it, two large ones with high carved backs at either end. The monkey-trees on the upper terrace, too, were visible outside against the sky, and the solemn crests of the wellingtonias on the terraces below. The enormous clock on the mantelpiece ticked very slowly, as though its machinery were running down, and I made out the pale round patch that was its face. Resisting my first inclination to turn the lights up—my hand had gone so far as to finger the friendly knob—I crossed the room so carefully that no single board creaked, nor a single chair, as I rested a hand upon its back, moved on the parquet flooring. I



turned neither to the right nor left, nor did I once look back.

I went towards the long corridor, filled with priceless *objets d'art*, that led through various ante-chambers into the spacious music-room, and only at the mouth of this corridor did I next halt a moment in uncertainty. For this long corridor, lit faintly by high windows on the left from the veranda, was very narrow, owing to the mass of shelves and fancy tables it contained. It was not that I feared to knock over precious things as I went, but that, because of its ungenerous width, there would be no room to pass another person—if I met one. And the certainty had suddenly come upon me that somewhere in this corridor another person at this actual moment stood. Here, somehow, amid all this dead atmosphere of furniture and impersonal emptiness, lay the hint of a living human presence; and with such conviction did it come upon me, that my hand instinctively gripped the pistol in my pocket before I could even think. Either some one had passed along this corridor just before me, or some one lay waiting at its farther end—withdrawn or flattened into one of the little recesses, to let me pass. It was the person who had opened the door. And the blood ran from my heart as I realised it.

It was not courage that sent me on, but rather a strong impulsion from behind that made it impossible to retreat: the feeling that a throng pressed at my back, drawing nearer and nearer; that I was already half surrounded, swept, dragged, coaxed into a vast prison-house where there was wailing and gnashing of teeth, where their worm dieth not and their fire is not quenched. I can neither explain nor justify the storm of irrational emotion that swept me as I stood in that moment, staring down the length of the silent corridor towards the music-room at the far end, I can only repeat that no personal bravery sent me down it, but that the negative emotion of fear was swamped in this vast sea of pity and commiseration for others that surged upon me.

My senses, at least, were no whit confused; if anything, my brain registered impressions with keener accuracy than usual. I noticed, for instance, that the two swinging doors of baize that cut the corridor into definite lengths, making little rooms of the spaces between them, were both wide open—in the dim light no mean achievement. Also that the fronds of a palm plant, some ten feet in front of me, still stirred gently from the air of some one who had recently gone past them. The long green leaves waved to and fro like hands. Then I went stealthily forward down the narrow space, proud even that I had this command of myself, and so carefully that my feet made no sound upon the Japanese matting on the floor.

It was a journey that seemed timeless. I have no idea how fast or

slow I went, but I remember that I deliberately examined articles on each side of me, peering with particular closeness into the recesses of wall and window. I passed the first baize doors, and the passage beyond them widened out to hold shelves of books; there were sofas and small reading-tables against the wall. It narrowed again presently, as I entered the second stretch. The windows here were higher and smaller, and marble statuettes of classical subjects lined the walls, watching me like figures of the dead. Their white and shining faces saw me, yet made no sign. I passed next between the second baize doors. They, too, had been fastened back with hooks against the wall. Thus all doors were open—had been recently opened.

And so, at length, I found myself in the final widening of the corridor which formed an ante-chamber to the music-room itself. It had been used formerly to hold the over-flow of meetings. No door separated it from the great hall beyond, but heavy curtains hung usually to close it off, and these curtains were invariably drawn. They now stood wide. And here—I can merely state the impression that came upon me—I knew myself at last surrounded. The throng that pressed behind me, also surged in front: facing me in the big room, and waiting for my entry, stood a multitude; on either side of me, in the very air above my head, the vast assemblage paused upon my coming. The pause, however, was momentary, for instantly the deep, tumultuous movement was resumed that yet was silent as a cavern underground. I felt the agony that was in it, the passionate striving, the awful struggle to escape. The semi-darkness held beseeching faces that fought to press themselves upon my vision, yearning yet hopeless eyes, lips scorched and dry, mouths that opened to implore but found no craved delivery in actual words, and a fury of misery and hate that made the life in me stop dead, frozen by the horror of vain pity. That intolerable, vain Hope was everywhere.

And the multitude, it came to me, was not a single multitude, but many; for, as soon as one huge division pressed too close upon the edge of escape, it was dragged back by another and prevented. The wild host was divided against itself. Here dwelt the Shadow I had "imagined" weeks ago, and in it struggled armies of lost souls as in the depths of some bottomless pit whence there is no escape. The layers mingled, fighting against themselves in endless torture. It was in this great Shadow I had clairvoyantly seen Mabel, but about its fearful mouth, I now was certain, hovered another figure of darkness, a figure who sought to keep it in existence, since to her thought were due those lampless depths of woe without escape . . . Towards me the multitudes now surged.

It was a sound and a movement that brought me back into myself.

The great clock at the farther end of the room just then struck the hour of three. That was the sound. And the movement—? I was aware that a figure was passing across the distant centre of the floor. Instantly I dropped back into the arena of my little human terror. My hand again clutched stupidly at the pistol butt. I drew back into the folds of the heavy curtain. And the figure advanced.

I remember every detail. At first it seemed to me enormous—this advancing shadow—far beyond human scale; but as it came nearer, I measured it, though not consciously, by the organ pipes that gleamed in faint colours, just above its gradual soft approach. It passed them, already half-way across the great room. I saw then that its stature was that of ordinary men. The prolonged booming of the clock died away. I heard the football, shuffling upon the polished boards. I heard another sound—a voice, low and monotonous, droning as in prayer. The figure was speaking. It was a woman. And she carried in both hands before her a small object that faintly shimmered—a glass of water. And then I recognised her.

There was still an instant's time before she reached me, and I made use of it. I shrank back, flattening myself against the wall. Her voice ceased a moment, as she turned and carefully drew the curtains together behind her, closing them with one hand. Oblivious of my presence, though she actually touched my dressing-gown with the hand that pulled the cords, she resumed her dreadful, solemn march, disappearing at length down the long vista of the corridor like a shadow. But as she passed me, her voice began again, so that I heard each word distinctly as she uttered it, her head aloft, her figure upright, as though she moved at the head of a procession:

"A drop of cold water, given in His name, shall moisten their burning tongues."

It was repeated monotonously over and over again, droning down into the distance as she went, until at length both voice and figure faded into the shadows at the farther end.

For a time, I have no means of measuring precisely, I stood in that dark corner, pressing my back against the wall, and would have drawn the curtains down to hide me had I dared to stretch an arm out. The dread that presently the woman would return passed gradually away. I realised that the air had emptied, the crowd her presence had stirred into activity had retreated; I was alone in the gloomy under-spaces of the odious building . . . Then I remembered suddenly again the terrified women waiting for me on that upper landing; and realised that my skin was wet and freezing cold after a profuse perspiration. I prepared to retrace my steps. I remember the effort it cost me to leave the support of the wall and covering darkness of my corner,

and step out into the grey light of the corridor. At first I sidled, then, finding this mode of walking impossible, turned my face boldly and walked quickly, regardless that my dressing-gown set the precious objects shaking as I passed. A wind that sighed mournfully against the high, small windows seemed to have got inside the corridor as well; it felt so cold; and every moment I dreaded to see the outline of the woman's figure as she waited in recess or angle against the wall for me to pass.

Was there another thing I dreaded even more? I cannot say. I only know that the first baize doors had swung-to behind me, and the second ones were close at hand, when the great dim thunder caught me, pouring up with prodigious volume so that it seemed to roll out from another world. It shook the very bowels of the building. I was closer to it than that other time, when it had followed me from the goblin garden. There was strength and hardness in it, as of metal reverberation. Some touch of numbness, almost of paralysis, must surely have been upon me that I felt no actual terror, for I remember even turning and standing still to hear it better. "That is the Noise," my thought ran stupidly, and I think I whispered it aloud; "*the Doors are closing.*"

The wind outside against the windows was audible, so it cannot have been really loud, yet to me it was the biggest, deepest sound I have ever heard, but so far away, with such awful remoteness in it, that I had to doubt my own ears at the same time. It seemed underground—the rumbling of earthquake gates that shut remorselessly within the rocky Earth—stupendous ultimate thunder. *They* were shut off from help again. The doors had closed.

I felt a storm of pity, an agony of bitter, futile hate sweep through me. My memory of the figure changed then. The Woman with the glass of cooling water had stepped down from Heaven; but the Man—or was it Men?—who smeared this terrible layer of belief and Thought upon the world! . . .

I crossed the dining-room—it was fancy, of course, that held my eyes from glancing at the portrait for fear I should see it smiling approval—and so finally reached the hall, where the light from the floor above seemed now quite bright in comparison. All the doors I closed carefully behind me; but first I had to open them. The woman had closed every one. Up the stairs, then, I actually ran, two steps at a time. My sister was standing outside Mabel's door. By her face I knew that she had also heard. There was no need to ask. I quickly made my mind up.

"There's nothing," I said, and detailed briefly my tour of search. "All is quiet and undisturbed downstairs." May God forgive me!

She beckoned to me, closing the door softly behind her. My heart beat violently a moment, then stood still.

"Mabel," she said aloud.

It was like the sentence of a judge, that one short word.

I tried to push past her and go in, but she stopped me with her arm. She was wholly mistress of herself, I saw.

"Hush!" she said in a lower voice. "I've got her round again with brandy. She's sleeping quietly now. We won't disturb her."

She drew me farther out into the landing, and as she did so, the clock in the hall below struck half-past three. I had stood, then, thirty minutes in the corridor below. "You've been such a long time," she said simply. "I feared for you," and she took my hand in her own that was cold and clammy.

## 8

And then, while that dreadful house stood listening about us in the early hours of this chill morning upon the edge of winter, she told me, with laconic brevity, things about Mabel that I heard as from a distance. There was nothing so unusual or tremendous in the short recital, nothing indeed I might not have already guessed for myself. It was the time and scene, the inference, too, that made it so afflicting: the idea that Mabel believed herself so utterly and hopelessly lost-beyond recovery *damned*.

That she had loved him with so passionate a devotion that she had given her soul into his keeping, this certainly I had not divined—probably because I had never thought about it one way or the other. He had "converted" her, I knew, but that she had subscribed wholeheartedly to that most cruel and ugly of his dogmas—this was new to me, and came with a certain shock as I heard it. In love, of course, the weaker nature is receptive to all manner of suggestion. This man had "suggested" his pet brimstone lake so vividly that she had listened and believed. He had frightened her into heaven; and his heaven, a definite locality in the skies, had its foretaste here on earth in miniature—The Towers, house and garden. Into his dolorous scheme of a handful saved and millions damned, his enclosure, as it were, of sheep and goats, he had swept her before she was aware of it. Her mind no longer was her own. And it was Mrs. Marsh who kept the thought-stream open, though tempered, as she deemed, with that touch of craven, superstitious mercy.

But what I found it difficult to understand, and still more difficult to accept, was that, during her year abroad, she had been so haunted with a secret dread of that hideous after-death that she had finally revolted and tried to recover that clearer state of mind she had enjoyed before the religious bully had stunned her—yet had tried in vain. She had returned to The Towers to find her soul again, only to realise that it was lost eternally. The cleaner state of mind lay then beyond recovery. In the reaction that followed the removal of his terrible “suggestion,” she felt the crumbling of all that he had taught her, but searched in vain for the peace and beauty his teachings had destroyed. Nothing came to replace these. She was empty, desolate, hopeless; craving her former joy and carelessness, she found only hate and diabolical calculation. This man, whom she had loved to the point of losing her soul for him, had bequeathed to her one black and fiery thing—the terror of the damned. His thinking wrapped her in this iron garment that held her fast.

All this Frances told me, far more briefly than I have here repeated it. In her eyes and gestures and laconic sentences lay the conviction of great beating issues and of menacing drama my own description fails to recapture. It was all so incongruous and remote from the world I lived in that more than once a smile, though a smile of pity, fluttered to my lips; but a glimpse of my face in the mirror showed rather the leer of a grimace. There was no real laughter anywhere that night. The entire adventure seemed so incredible, here, in this twentieth century—but yet delusion, that feeble word, did not occur once in the comments my mind suggested though did not utter. I remembered that forbidding Shadow too; my sister’s water-colours; the vanished personality of our hostess; the inexplicable, thundering Noise, and the figure of Mrs. Marsh in her midnight ritual that was so childish yet so horrible. I shivered in spite of my own “emancipated” cast of mind.

“There is no Mabel,” were the words with which my sister sent another shower of ice down my spine. “He has killed her in his lake of fire and brimstone.”

I stared at her blankly, as in a nightmare where nothing true or possible ever happened.

“He killed her in his lake of fire and brimstone,” she repeated more faintly.

A desperate effort was in me to say the strong, sensible thing which should destroy the oppressive horror that grew so stiflingly about us both. but again the mirror drew the attempted smile into the merest grin, betraying the distortion that was everywhere in the place.

“You mean,” I stammered beneath my breath, “that her faith has

gone, but that the terror has remained?" I asked it, dully groping. I moved out of the line of the reflection in the glass.

She bowed her head as though beneath a weight; her skin was the pallor of grey ashes.

"You mean," I said louder, "that she has lost her-mind?"

"She is terror incarnate," was the whispered answer. "Mabel has lost her soul. Her soul is-there!" She pointed horribly below. "She is seeking it . . . ?"

The word "soul" stung me into something of my normal self again.

"But her terror, poor thing, is not-cannot be-transferable to *us*!" I exclaimed more vehemently. "It certainly is not convertible into feelings, sights and-even sounds!"

She interrupted me quickly, almost impatiently, speaking with that conviction by which she conquered me so easily that night.

"It is her terror that has revived 'the Others.' It has brought her into touch with them. They are loose and driving after her. Her efforts at resistance have given them also hope-that escape, after all, is possible. Day and night they strive."

"Escape! Others!" The anger fast rising in me dropped of its own accord at the moment of birth. It shrank into a shuddering beyond my control. In that moment, I think, I would have believed in the possibility of anything and everything she might tell me. To argue or contradict seemed equally futile.

"His strong belief, as also the beliefs of others who have preceded him," she replied, so sure of herself that I actually turned to look over my shoulder, "have left their shadow like a thick deposit over the house and grounds. To them, poor souls imprisoned by thought, it was hopeless as granite walls-until her resistance, her effort to dissipate it-let in light. Now, in their thousands, they are flocking to this little light, seeking escape. Her own escape, don't you see, may release them all!"

It took my breath away. Had his predecessors, former occupants of this house, also preached damnation of all the world but their own exclusive sect? Was this the explanation of her obscure talk of "layers," each striving against the other for domination? And if men are spirits, and these spirits survive, could strong Thought thus determine their condition even afterwards?

So many questions flooded into me that I selected no one of them, but stared in uncomfortable silence, bewildered, out of my depth, and acutely, painfully distressed. There was so odd a mixture of possible truth and incredible, unacceptable explanation in it all, so much confirmed, yet so much left darker than before. What she said did, indeed, offer a quasi-interpretation of my own series of abominable

sensations—strife, agony, pity, hate, escape—but so far-fetched that only the deep conviction in her voice and attitude made it tolerable for a second even. I found myself in a curious state of mind. I could neither think clearly nor say a word to refute her amazing statements, whispered there beside me in the shivering hours of the early morning with only a wall between ourselves and—Mabel. Close behind her words I remember this singular thing, however—that an atmosphere as of the Inquisition seemed to rise and stir about the room, beating awful wings of black above my head.

Abruptly, then, a moment's common-sense returned to me. I faced her.

"And the Noise?" I said aloud, more firmly, "the roar of the closing doors? We have *all* heard that! Is that subjective too?"

Frances looked sideways about her in a queer fashion that made my flesh creep again. I spoke brusquely, almost angrily. I repeated the question, and waited with anxiety for her reply.

"What noise?" she asked, with the frank expression of an innocent child. "What closing doors?"

But her face turned from grey to white, and I saw that drops of perspiration glistened on her forehead. She caught at the back of a chair to steady herself, then glanced about her again with that sidelong look that made my blood run cold. I understood suddenly then. She did not take in what I said. I knew now. She was listening—for something else.

And the discovery revived in me a far stronger emotion than any mere desire for immediate explanation. Not only did I not insist upon an answer, but I was actually terrified lest she *would* answer. More, I felt in me a terror lest I should be moved to describe my own experiences below-stairs, thus increasing their reality and so the reality of all. She might even explain them too!

Still listening intently, she raised her head and looked me in the eyes. Her lips opened to speak. The words came to me from a great distance, it seemed, and her voice had a sound like a stone that drops into a deep well, its fate though hidden, known.

"We are in it with her, too, Bill. We are in it with her. Our interpretations vary—because we are—in parts of it only. Mabel is in it—*all*."

The desire for violence came over me. If only she would say a definite thing in plain King's English! If only I could find it in me to give utterances to what shouted so loud within me! If only—the same old cry—something would happen! For all this elliptic talk that dazed my mind left obscurity everywhere. Her atrocious meaning, none the less, flashed through me, though vanishing before it wholly divulged itself.



It brought a certain reaction with it. I found my tongue. Whether I actually believed what I said is more than I can swear to; that it seemed to me wise at the moment is all I remember. My mind was in a state of obscure perception less than that of normal consciousness.

"Yes, Frances, I believe that what you say is the truth, and that we are in it with her"—I meant to say it with loud, hostile emphasis, but instead I whispered it lest she should hear the trembling of my voice—"and for that reason, my dear sister, we leave to-morrow, you and I—to-day, rather, since it is long past midnight—we leave this house of the damned. We go back to London."

Frances looked up, her face distraught almost beyond recognition. But it was not my words that caused the tumult in her heart. It was a sound—the sound she had been listening for—so faint I barely caught it myself, and had she not pointed I could never have known the direction whence it came. Small and terrible it rose again in the stillness of the night, the sound of gnashing teeth. And behind it came another—the tread of stealthy footsteps. Both were just outside the door.

The room swung round me for a second. My first instinct to prevent my sister going out—she had dashed past me frantically to the door—gave place to another when I saw the expression in her eyes. I followed her lead instead; it was surer than my own. The pistol in my pocket swung uselessly against my thigh. I was flustered beyond belief and ashamed that I was so.

"Keep close to me, Frances," I said huskily, as the door swung wide and a shaft of light fell upon a figure moving rapidly. Mabel was going down the corridor. Beyond her, in the shadows on the staircase, a second figure stood beckoning, scarcely visible.

"Before they get her! Quick!" was screamed into my ears and our arms were about her in the same moment. It was a horrible scene. Not that Mabel struggled in the least, but that she collapsed as we caught her and fell with her dead weight, as of a corpse, limp, against us. And her teeth began again. They continued, even beneath the hand that Frances clapped upon her lips . . .

We carried her back into her own bedroom, where she lay down peacefully enough. It was so soon over . . . The rapidity of the whole thing robbed it of reality almost. It had the swiftness of something remembered rather than of something witnessed. She slept again so quickly that it was almost as if we had caught her sleep-walking. I cannot say. I asked no questions at the time; I have asked none since; and my help was needed as little as the protection of my pistol. Frances was strangely competent and collected . . . I lingered for some time uselessly by the door, till at length, looking up with a sigh, she made

a sign for me to go.

"I shall wait in your room next door," I whispered, "till you come." But, though going out, I waited in the corridor instead, so as to hear the faintest call for help. In that dark corridor upstairs I waited, but not long. It may have been fifteen minutes when Frances reappeared, locking the door softly behind her. Leaning over the banisters, I saw her.

"I'll go in again about six o'clock," she whispered, "as soon as it gets light. She is sound asleep now. Please don't wait. If anything happens I'll call—you might leave your door ajar, perhaps." And she came up, looking like a ghost.

But I saw her first safely into bed, and the rest of the night I spent in an armchair close to my opened door, listening for the slightest sound. Soon after five o'clock I heard Frances fumbling with the key, and, peering over the railing again, I waited till she reappeared and went back into her own room. She closed her door. Evidently she was satisfied that all was well.

Then, and then only, did I go to bed myself, but not to sleep. I could not get the scene out of my mind, especially that odious detail of it which I hoped and believed my sister had not seen—the still, dark figure of the house-keeper waiting on the stairs below—waiting, of course, for Mabel.

## 9

It seems I became a mere spectator after that; my sister's head was so assured for one thing, and, for another, the responsibility of leaving Mabel alone—Frances laid it bodily upon my shoulders—was a little more than I cared about. Moreover, when we all three met later in the day, things went on so exactly as before, so absolutely without friction or distress, that to present a sudden, obvious excuse for cutting our visit short seemed ill-judged. And on the lowest grounds it would have been desertion. At any rate, it was beyond my powers, and Frances was quite firm that *she* must stay. We therefore did stay. Things that happen in the night always seem exaggerated and distorted when the sun shines brightly next morning; no one can reconstruct the terror of a nightmare afterwards, nor comprehend why it seemed so overwhelming at the time.

I slept till ten o'clock, and when I rang for breakfast, a note from my sister lay upon the tray, its message of counsel couched in a calm

and comforting strain. Mabel, she assured me, was herself again and remembered nothing of what had happened; there was no need of any violent measures; I was to treat her exactly as if I knew nothing. "And, if you don't mind, Bill, let us leave the matter unmentioned between ourselves as well. Discussion exaggerates; such things are best not talked about. I'm sorry I disturbed you so unnecessarily; I was stupidly excited. Please forget all the things I said at the moment." She had written "nonsense" first instead of "things," then scratched it out. She wished to convey that hysteria had been abroad in the night, and I readily gulped the explanation down, though it could not satisfy me in the smallest degree.

There was another week of our visit still, and we stayed it out to the end without disaster. My desire to leave at times became that frantic thing, desire to escape; but I controlled it, kept silent, watched and wondered. Nothing happened. As before, and everywhere, there was no sequence of development, no connection between cause and effect; and climax, none whatever. The thing swayed up and down, backwards and forwards like a great loose curtain in the wind, and I could only vaguely surmise what caused the draught or why there was a curtain at all. A novelist might mould the queer material into coherent sequence that would be interesting but could not be true. It remains, therefore, not a story but a history. Nothing happened.

Perhaps my intense dislike of the fall of darkness was due wholly to my stirred imagination, and perhaps my anger when I learned that Frances now occupied a bed in our hostess's room was unreasonable. Nerves were unquestionably on edge. I was for ever on the look-out for some event that should make escape imperative, but yet that never presented itself. I slept lightly, left my door ajar to catch the slightest sound, even made stealthy tours of the house below-stairs while everybody dreamed in their beds. But I discovered nothing; the doors were always locked; I neither saw the housekeeper again in unreasonable times and places, nor heard a footstep in the passages and halls. The Noise was never once repeated. That horrible, ultimate thunder, my intensest dread of all lay withdrawn into the abyss whence it had twice arisen. And though in my thoughts it was sternly denied existence, the great black reason for the fact afflicted me unbelievably. Since Mabel's fruitless effort to escape, the Doors kept closed remorselessly. She had failed; *they* gave up hope. For this was the explanation that haunted the region of my mind where feelings stir and hint before they clothe themselves in actual language. Only I firmly kept it there; it never knew expression.

But, if my ears were open, my eyes were opened too, and it were

idle to pretend that I did not notice a hundred details that were capable of sinister interpretation had I been weak enough to yield. Some protective barrier had fallen into ruins round me, so that Terror stalked behind the general collapse; feeling for me through all the gaping fissures. Much of this, I admit, must have been merely the elaboration of those sensations I had first vaguely felt, before subsequent events and my talks with Frances had dramatised them into living thoughts. I therefore leave them unmentioned in this history just as my mind left them unmentioned in that interminable final week.

Our life went on precisely as before—Mabel unreal and outwardly so still; Frances, secretive, anxious, tactful to the point of slyness, and keen to save to the point of self-forgetfulness. There were the same stupid meals, the same wearisome long evenings, the stifling ugliness of house and grounds, the Shadow settling in so thickly that it seemed almost a visible, tangible thing. I came to feel the only friendly things in all this hostile, cruel place were the robins that hopped boldly over the monstrous terraces and even up to the windows of the unsightly house itself. The robins alone knew joy; they danced, believing no evil thing was possible in all God's radiant world. They believed in everybody; *their* god's plan of life had no room in it for hell, damnation and lakes of brimstone. I came to love the little birds. Had Samuel Franklyn known them, he might have preached a different sermon, bequeathing love in place of terror! . . .

Most of my time I spent writing; but was it a pretence at best, and rather a dangerous one besides. For it stirred the mind to production, with the result that other things came pouring in as well. With reading it was the same. In the end I found an aggressive, deliberate resistance to be the only way of feasible defence. To walk far afield was out of the question, for it meant leaving my sister too long alone, so that my exercise was confined to nearer home. My saunters in the grounds, however, never surprised the goblin garden again. It was close at hand, but I seemed unable to get wholly into it. Too many things assailed my mind for any one to hold exclusive possession, perhaps.

Indeed, all the interpretations, all the "layers," to use my sister's phrase, slipped in by turns and lodged there for a time. They came day and night, and though my reason denied them entrance they held their own as by a kind of squatters' right. They stirred moods already in me, that is, and did not introduce entirely new ones; for every mind conceals ancestral deposits that have been cultivated in turn along the whole line of its descent. Any day a chance shower may cause this one or that to blossom. Thus it came to me, at any rate. After darkness the Inquisition paced the empty corridors and set up

ghastly apparatus in the dismal halls; and once, in the library, there swept over me that easy and delicious conviction that by confessing my wickedness I could resume it later, since Confession is expression, and expression brings relief and leaves one ready to accumulate again. And in such mood I felt bitter and unforgiving towards all others who thought differently. Another time it was a Pagan thing that assaulted me—so trivial yet oh, so significant at the time—when I dreamed that a herd of centaurs rolled up with a great stamping of hoofs round the house to destroy it, and then woke to hear the horses tramping across the field below the lawns; they neighed ominously and their noisy panting was audible as if it were just outside my windows.

But the tree episode, I think, was the most curious of all—except, perhaps, the incident with the children which I shall mention in a moment—for its closeness to reality was so unforgettable. Outside the east window of my room stood a giant wellingtonia on the lawn, its head rising level with the upper sash. It grew some twenty feet away, planted on the highest terrace, and I often saw it when closing my curtains for the night, noticing how it drew its heavy skirts about it, and how the light from other windows threw glimmering streaks and patches that turned it into the semblance of a towering, solemn image. It stood there then so strikingly, somehow like a great old-world idol, that it claimed attention. Its appearance was curiously formidable. Its branches rustled without visibly moving and it had a certain portentous, forbidding air, so grand and dark and monstrous in the night that I was always glad when my curtains shut it out. Yet, once in bed, I had never thought about it one way or the other, and by day had certainly never sought it out.

One night, then, as I went to bed and closed this window against a cutting easterly wind, I saw—that there were two of these trees. A brother wellingtonia rose mysteriously beside it, equally huge, equally towering, equally monstrous. The menacing pair of them faced me there upon the lawn. But in this new arrival lay a strange suggestion that frightened me before I could argue it away. Exact counterpart of its giant companion, it revealed also that gross, odious quality that all my sister's paintings held. I got the odd impression that the rest of these trees, stretching away dimly in a troop over the farther lawns, were similar, and that, led by this enormous pair, they had all moved boldly closer to my windows. At the same moment a blind was drawn down over an upper room; the second tree disappeared into the surrounding darkness. It was, of course, this chance light that had brought it into the field of vision, but when the black shutter dropped over it, hiding it from view, the manner of its vanishing pro-

duced the queer effect that it had slipped into its companion—almost that it had been an emanation of the one I so disliked, and not really a tree at all! In this way the garden turned vehicle for expressing what lay behind it all! . . .

The behaviour of the doors, the little, ordinary doors, seems scarcely worth mention at all, their queer way of opening and shutting of their own accord; for this was accountable in a hundred natural ways, and to tell the truth, I never caught one in the act of moving. Indeed, only after frequent repetitions did the detail force itself upon me, when, having noticed one, I noticed all. It produced, however, the unpleasant impression of a continual coming and going in the house, as though, screened cleverly and purposely from actual sight, some one in the building held constant invisible intercourse with—others.

Upon detailed descriptions of these uncertain incidents I do not venture, individually so trivial, but taken all together so impressive and so insolent. But the episode of the children, mentioned above, was different. And I give it because it showed how vividly the intuitive child-mind received the impression—one impression, at any rate—of what was in the air. It may be told in a very few words. I believe they were the coachman's children, and that the man had been in Mr. Franklyn's service; but of neither point am I quite positive. I heard screaming in the rose-garden that runs along the stable walls—it was one afternoon not far from the tea-hour—and on hurrying up I found a little girl of nine or ten fastened with ropes to a rustic seat, and two other children—boys, one about twelve and one much younger—gathering sticks beneath the climbing rose-trees. The girl was white and frightened, but the others were laughing and talking among themselves so busily while they picked that they did not notice my abrupt arrival. Some game, I understood, was in progress, but a game that had become too serious for the happiness of the prisoner, for there was a fear in the girl's eyes that was a very genuine fear indeed. I unfastened her at once; the ropes were so loosely and clumsily knotted that they had not hurt her skin; it was not that which made her pale. She collapsed a moment upon the bench, then picked up her tiny skirts and dived away at full speed into the safety of the stable-yard. There was no response to my brief comforting, but she ran as though for her life, and I divined that some horrid boys' cruelty had been afoot. It was probably mere thoughtlessness, as cruelty with children usually is, but something in me decided to discover exactly what it was.

And the boys not one whit alarmed at my intervention, merely laughed shyly when I explained that their prisoner had escaped, and told me frankly what their "grime" had been. There was no vestige

of shame in them, nor any idea, of course, that they aped a monstrous reality. That it was mere pretence was neither here nor there. To them, though make-believe it was a make-believe of something that was right and natural and in no sense cruel. Grown-ups did it too. It was necessary for her good.

"We was going to burn her up, sir," the older one informed me, answering my "Why?" with the explanation "Because she wouldn't believe what we wanted 'er to believe."

And, game though it was, the feeling of reality about the little episode was so arresting, so terrific in some way, that only with difficulty did I confine my admonitions on this occasion to mere words. The boys slunk off, frightened in their turn, yet not, I felt, convinced that they had erred in principle. It was their inheritance. They had breathed it in with the atmosphere of their bringing-up. They would renew the salutary torture when they could—till she "believed" as they did.

I went back into the house, afflicted with a passion of mingled pity and distress impossible to describe, yet on my short way across the garden was attacked by other moods in turn, each more real and bitter than its predecessor. I received the whole series, as it were, at once. I felt like a diver rising to the surface through layers of water at different temperatures, though here the natural order was reversed, and the cooler strata were uppermost, the heated ones below. Thus, I was caught by the goblin touch of the willows that fringed the field; by the sensuous curving of the twisted ash that formed a gateway to the little grove of sapling oaks where fauns and satyrs lurked to play in the moonlight before Pagan altars; and by the cloaking darkness, next, of the copse of stunted pines, close gathered each to each, where hooded figures stalked behind an awful cross. The episode with the children seemed to have opened me like a knife. The whole Place rushed at me.

I suspect this synthesis of many moods produced in me that climax of loathing and disgust which made me feel the limit of bearable emotion had been reached, so that I made straight to find Frances in order to convince her that at any rate *I* must leave. For, although this was our last day in the house, and we had arranged to go next day, the dread was in me that she would still find some persuasive reason for staying on. And an unexpected incident then made my dread unnecessary. The front door was open and a cab stood in the drive; a tall elderly man was gravely talking in the hall with the parlour-maid we called the Grenadier. He held a piece of paper in his hand. "I have called to see the house," I heard him say, as I ran up the stairs to Frances who was peering like an inquisitive child over the

banisters.

"Yes," she told me with a sigh, I know not whether of resignation or relief, "the house is to be let or sold. Mabel has decided. Some Society or other, I believe--"

I was overjoyed: this made our leaving right and possible "You never told me, Frances!"

"Mabel only heard of it a few days ago. She told me herself this morning. It is a chance, she says. Alone she cannot get it 'straight.'"

"Defeat?" I asked, watching her closely.

"She thinks she has found a way out. It's not a family, you see, it's a Society, a sort of Community--they go in for thought--"

"A Community!" I gasped. "You mean religious?"

She shook her head. "Not exactly," she said smiling, "but some kind of association of men and women who want a headquarters in the country--a place where they can write and meditate--*think*--mature their plans and all the rest--I don't know exactly what."

"Utopian dreamers?" I asked, yet feeling an immense relief come over me as I heard. But I asked in ignorance, not cynically. Frances would know. She knew all this kind of thing.

"Not, not that exactly," she smiled. "Their teachings are grand and simple--old as the world too, really--the basis of every religion before men's mind perverted them with their manufactured creeds--"

Footsteps on the stairs, and the sound of voices, interrupted our odd impromptu conversation, as the Grenadier came up, followed by the tall, grave gentleman who was being shown over the house. My sister drew me along the corridor towards her room, where she went in and closed the door behind me, yet not before I had stolen a good look at the caller--long enough, at least, for his face and general appearance to have made a definite impression on me. For something strong and peaceful emanated from his presence; he moved with such quiet dignity; the glance of his eyes was so steady and reassuring, that my mind labelled him instantly as a type of man one would turn to in an emergency and not be disappointed. I had seen him but for a passing moment, but I had seen him twice, and the way he walked down the passage, looking competently about him, conveyed the same impression as when I saw him standing at the door--fearless, tolerant, wise. "A sincere and kindly character," I judged instantly, "a man whom some big kind of love has trained in sweetness towards the world; no hate in him anywhere." A great deal, no doubt, to read in so brief a glance! Yet his voice confirmed in it too.

"Have I become suddenly sensitive to people's atmospheres in this extraordinary fashion?" I asked myself, smiling, as I stood in the room and heard the door close behind me. "Have I developed some clair-



voyant faculty here?" At any other time I should have mocked.

And I sat down and faced my sister feeling strangely comforted and at peace for the first time since I had stepped beneath The Towers' roof a month ago. Frances, I then was, was smiling a little as she watched me.

"You know him?" I asked.

"You felt it too?" was her question in reply. "No," she added, "I don't know him—beyond the fact that he is a leader in the Movement and has devoted years and money to its objects. Mabel felt the same thing in him that you have felt—and jumped at it."

"But you've seen him before?" I urged, for the certainty was in me that he was no stranger to her.

She shook her head. "He called one day early this week, when you were out. Mabel saw him, I believe—" She hesitated a moment, as though expecting me to stop her with my usual impatience of such subjects—"I believe he has explained everything to her—the beliefs he embodies, she declares, are her salvation—might be, rather, if she could adopt them."

"Conversion again!" For I remembered her riches, and how gladly a Society would gobble them.

"The layers I told you about," she continued calmly, shrugging her shoulders slightly—"the deposits that are left behind by strong thinking and *real* belief—but especially by ugly, hateful belief, because, you see—unfortunately there's more vital passion in that sort—"

"Frances I don't understand a bit," I said out loud, but said it a little humbly, for the impression the man had left was still strong upon me and I was grateful for the steady sense of peace and comfort he had somehow introduced. The horrors had been so dreadful. My nerves, doubtless, were more than a little overstrained. Absurd as it must sound, I classed him in my mind with the robins, the happy, confiding robins who believed in everybody and thought no evil! I laughed a moment at my ridiculous idea, and my sister, encouraged by this sign of patience in me, continued more fluently.

"Of course you don't understand, Bill? Why should you? You've never thought about such things. Needing no creed yourself, you think all creeds are rubbish."

"I'm open to conviction—I'm tolerant," I interrupted.

"You're as narrow as Sam Franklyn, and as crammed with prejudice," she answered, knowing that she had me at her mercy.

"Then, pray, what may be his, or his Society's beliefs?" I asked, feeling no desire to argue, "and how are they going to prove your Mabel's salvation? Can they bring beauty into all this aggressive hate and ugliness?"

"Certain hope and peace," she said, "that peace which is understanding, and that understanding which explains *all* creeds and therefore tolerates them."

"Toleration! The one word a religious man loathes above all others! His pet word is damnation—"

"Tolerates them," she repeated patiently, unperturbed by my explosion, "because it includes them all."

"Fine, if true," I admitted, "very fine. But how, pray, does it include them all?"

"Because the key-word, the motto, of their Society is, 'There is no religion higher than Truth,' and it has no single dogma of any kind. Above all," she went on, "because it claims that no individual can be 'lost.' It teaches universal salvation. To damn outsiders is uncivilised, childish, impure. Some take longer than others—it's according to the way they think and live—but all find peace, through development, in the end. What the creeds call a hopeless soul, it regards as a soul having further to go. There is no damnation—"

"Well, well" I exclaimed, feeling that she rode her hobby-horse too wildly, too roughly over me, "but what is the bearing of all this upon this dreadful place, and upon Mabel? I'll admit that there is this atmosphere—this—er—inexplicable horror in the house and grounds, and that if not of damnation exactly, it is certainly damnable. I'm not too prejudiced to deny *that*, for I've felt it myself."

To my relief she was brief. She made her statement, leaving me to take it or reject it as I would.

"The thought and belief its former occupants have left behind. For there has been coincidence here, a coincidence that must be rare. The site on which this modern house now stands was Roman, before that Early Britain, with burial mounds, before that again, Druid—the Druid stones still lie in that copse below the field, the Tumuli among the ilexes behind the drive. The older building Sam Franklyn altered and practically pulled down was a monastery; he changed the chapel into a meeting hall, which is now the music room; but, before he came here, the house was occupied by Manetti, a violent Catholic without tolerance or vision; and in the interval between these two, Julius Weinbaum had it, Hebrew of most rigid orthodox type imaginable—so they all have left their—"

"Even so," I repeated, yet interested to hear the rest, "what of it?"

"Simply this," said Frances with conviction, "that each in turn has left his layer of concentrated thinking and belief behind him; because each believed intensely, absolutely, beyond the least weakening of any doubt—the kind of strong belief and thinking that is rare anywhere to-day, the kind that wills, impregnates objects, saturates

the atmosphere, haunts, in a word. And each, believing he was utterly and finally right, damned with equally positive conviction the rest of the world. One and all preached that implicitly if not explicitly. It's the root of every creed. Last of the bigoted, grim series came Samuel Franklyn."

I listened in amazement that increased as she went on. Up to this point her explanation was so admirable. It was, indeed, a pretty study in psychology if it were true.

"Then why does nothing ever happen?" I enquired mildly. "A place so thickly haunted ought to produce a crop of no ordinary results!"

"There lies the proof," she went on in a lowered voice, "the proof of the horror and the ugly reality. The thought and belief of each occupant in turn kept all the others under. They gave no sign of life at the time. But the results of thinking never die. They crop out again the moment there's an opening. And, with the return of Mabel in her negative state, believing nothing positive herself, the place for the first time found itself free to reproduce its buried stores. Damnation, hell-fire, and the rest—the most permanent and vital thought of all those creeds, since it was applied to the majority of the world—broke loose again, for there was no restraint to hold it back. Each sought to obtain its former supremacy. None conquered. There results a pandemonium of hate and fear, of striving to escape, of agonised, bitter warring to find safety, peace—salvation. The place is saturated by that appalling stream of thinking—the terror of the damned. It concentrated upon Mabel, whose negative attitude furnished the channel of deliverance. You and I, according to our sympathy with her, were similarly involved. Nothing happened, because no one layer could ever gain the supremacy."

I was so interested—I dare not say amused—that I stared in silence while she paused a moment, afraid that she would draw rein and end the fairy tale too soon.

"The beliefs of this man, of his Society rather, vigorously thought and therefore vigorously given out here, will put the whole place straight. It will act as a solvent. These vitriolic layers denied, will fuse and disappear in the stream of gentle, tolerant sympathy which is love. For each member, worthy of the name, loves the world, and all creeds go into the melting-pot; Mabel, too, if she joins them out of real conviction, will find salvation—"

"Thinking, I know, is of the first importance," I objected, "but don't you, perhaps, exaggerate the power of feeling and emotion which in religion are *au fond* always hysterical?"

"What is the world," she told me, "but thinking and feeling? An individual's world is entirely what that individual thinks and believes—"

interpretation. There is no other. And unless he really thinks and really believes, he has no permanent world at all. I grant that few people think, and still fewer believe, and that most take ready-made suits and make them do. Only the strong make their own things; the lesser fry, Mabel among them, are merely swept up into what has been manufactured for them. They get along somehow. You and I have made for ourselves, Mabel has not. She is a nonentity, and when her belief is taken from her, she goes with it."

It was not in me just then to criticise the evasion, or pick out the sophistry from the truth. I merely waited for her to continue.

"None of us have Truth, my dear Frances," I ventured presently, seeing that she kept silent.

"Precisely," she answered, "but most of us have beliefs. And what one believes and thinks affects the world at large. Consider the legacy of hatred and cruelty involved in the doctrines men have built into their creeds where the *sine qua non* of salvation is absolute acceptance of one particular set of views or else perishing everlastingly—for only by repudiating history can they disavow it—"

"You're not quite accurate," I put in. "Not all the creeds teach damnation, do they? Franklyn did, of course, but the others are a bit modernised now surely?"

"Trying to get out of it," she admitted, "perhaps they are, but damnation of unbelievers—of most of the world, that is—is their rather favourite idea if you talk with them."

"I never have."

She smiled. "But I have," she said significantly, "So, if you consider what the various occupants of this house have so strongly held and thought and believed, you need not be surprised that the influence they have left behind them should be a dark and dreadful legacy. For thought, you know, does leave—"

The opening of the door, to my great relief, interrupted her, as the Grenadier led in the visitor to see the room. He bowed to both of us with a brief word of apology, looked round him, and withdrew, and with his departure the conversation between us came naturally to an end. I followed him out. Neither of us in any case, I think, cared to argue further.

And, so far as I am aware, the curious history of The Towers ends here too. There was no climax in the story sense. Nothing ever really happened. We left next morning for London. I only know that the Society in question took the house and have since occupied it to their entire satisfaction, and that Mabel, who became a member shortly afterwards, now stays there frequently when in need of repose from

the arduous and unselfish labours she took upon herself under its aegis. She dined with us only the other night, here in our tiny Chelsea flat, and a jollier, saner, more interesting and happy guest I could hardly wish for. She was vital—in the best sense; the lay-figure had come to life. I found it difficult to believe she was the same woman whose fearful effigy had floated down those dreary corridors and almost disappeared in the depths of that atrocious Shadow.

What her beliefs were now I was wise enough to leave unquestioned, and Frances, to my great relief, kept the conversation well away from such inappropriate topics. It was clear, however, that the woman had in herself some secret source of joy, that she was now an aggressive, positive force, sure of herself, and apparently afraid of nothing in heaven or hell. She radiated something very like hope and courage about her, and talked as though the world were a glorious place and everybody in it kind and beautiful. Her optimism was certainly infectious.

The Towers were mentioned only in passing. The name of Marsh came up— not *the* Marsh, it so happened, but a name in some book that was being discussed—and I was unable to restrain myself. Curiosity was too strong. I threw out a casual enquiry Mabel could leave unanswered if she wished. But there was no desire to avoid it. Her reply was frank and smiling.

"Would you believe it? She married," Mabel told me, though obviously surprised that I remembered the house-keeper at all; "and is happy as the day is long. She's found her right niche in life. A sergeant—"

"The army!" I ejaculated.

"Salvation Army," she explained merrily.

Frances exchanged a glance at me. I laughed too, for the information too me by surprise. I cannot say why exactly, but I expected at least to hear that the woman had met some dreadful end, not impossibly by burning.

"And The Towers, now called the Rest House," Mabel chattered on, "seems to me the most peaceful and delightful spot in England—"

"Really," I said politely.

"When I lived there in the old days—while you were there, perhaps, though I won't be sure," Mabel went on, "the story got abroad that it was haunted. Wasn't it odd? A less likely place for a ghost I've never seen. Why, it had no atmosphere at all." She said this to Frances, glancing up at me with a smile that apparently had no hidden meaning. "Did *you* notice anything queer about it when you were there?"

This was plainly addressed to me.

"I found it-er-difficult to settle down to anything," I said, after an instant's hesitation. I couldn't work there-'

"But I thought you wrote that wonderful book on the Deaf and Blind while you stayed with me," she asked innocently.

I stammered a little. "Oh no, not then, I only made a few notes-er-at The Towers. My mind, oddly enough, refused to produce at all down there. But-why do you ask? Did anything-was anything *supposed* to happen there?"

She looked searchingly into my eyes a moment before she answered:

"Not that I know of," she said simply.

# DAVID CASE

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## Fengriffen

*David Case (b.1937) is an American writer who spends most of his life in England and Europe writing pseudonymous novels. Once in a while he turns his talent to weird fiction, though never enough for him to be recognised by a sufficiently large readership to make him the name he ought to be. He first crept out of the woodwork in 1969 with his collection The Cell, which showed his predilection for stories of psychological lycanthropy. He later wrote a whole novel on the theme in Wolf Tracks (1980). It reoccurred in his second collection Fengriffen (1971) and it is the title story I've selected here. It was picked up by Milton Subotsky and filmed in 1972 as -And Now the Screaming Starts. Case reckons he once saw a werewolf in Greece-perhaps that helped him write from personal experience. Certainly there's a wonderful atmosphere about 'Fengriffen', the tale of a family curse. More recently Case turned to a novel of a more ancient curse in The Third Grave (1981). He's long overdue for a new book.*

**M**y first impression of Fengriffen House was skeletal.

I saw it from the carriage, rising against a stormy sundown like the blackened bones of some monstrous beast—not the fragile bleached bones of decaying man, but the massive arched columns of a primordial saurian who had wandered to this desolate moor and there lay down and died, perhaps of loneliness, long ages before. The spires and towers loomed up in sharp silhouette and the structure squatted beneath, sunken but not cowed, crouched ready to spring, so that the house seemed to exist on two planes at the same time—massive and slender, bulky and light, gross and fragile. It was a building which had aged through a series of architectural blunders, and it was awesome.

Our approach was from the east, by a twisted trail through the hills, and the agony of sunset formed a backdrop to the house. The sky swirled darkly above a fringe of blood red etching on a low and tempestuous evening. The turrets were aglow and the tallest trees caught the final slanting rays of cloud-filtered sunlight, while the world below was already drenched in the gloom of night.

I am a man of science, seldom affected by moods and not much given to fanciful thought, and yet as I gazed upon this remarkable construction, I sensed a pervading evil, an adumbration of unholy darkness. For a long minute I continued to stare, before I was able to smile at myself for my irrational sensations, and lean forward to the driver.

He did not wait for my question.

“Aye, this be Fengriffen,” he said.

He cracked his whip. I leaned back again. The wind was in the trees, playing a *leitmotif* behind the horses’ clattering hooves, and perhaps it was the chill in the air which caused me to shiver.

The carriage swung around and halted before the front entrance—an archway of stone set with massive wooden doors capable of admitting giants—doors worthy of a drawbridge, doors to stand fast against armies, and defy the rush of dragons. A man feels his insignificance while approaching such portals. The driver brought my bag, leaving the horses to paw restlessly at the turf; eager to move on to the stables, and suffering the habit of obedience. As we drew near, the doors opened silently. A servant, bent and deformed with time, took my hat and stick and relieved the driver of my bag. The driver returned to his carriage and I passed through the arch and into the house.

“You will be doctor Pope?” the servant said.

“I am.”

“The master is waiting in the library. If you will follow me, sir?”



He ushered me through panelled hallways of such dimension that the corners were shrouded in darkness, and rapped lightly upon a door. A voice called, "Enter." The servant opened the door and stood back, and I went into an impressive room of oak and leather and mellow candlelight. Charles Fengriffen walked across the room and extended his hand.

"Ah, Doctor Pope. It was kind of you to come so quickly. I am indebted."

His grip was firm and dry. He was a tall, lean man with aristocratic features and sufficient graciousness to keep arrogance from taking control. Yet, beneath this surface, lurked something of strained emotion—a hint of desperation behind his eyes. I was scarcely surprised at this, for he had not summoned me from London without reason.

"I trust your journey was comfortable?"

"Quite so."

"And not, I hope, in vain."

His eyes held mine for a moment, then shifted restlessly. It was natural that he should experience some degree of nervousness at this meeting; natural that he should have qualms and doubts concerning a practitioner of an infant science, not regarding the urgency of his summons. I had long grown accustomed to such reactions—resigned to them, I might say, for they so often prevented effective results.

"I hope not, sir."

"Yes," he said. He looked about the room with a vague expression; came to himself again and offered me a seat by the fire; sat opposite, then immediately rose again and crossed to the chimney-piece. He returned with a decanter and, without inquiring whether I wished to drink, poured me a brandy. I sipped and found it excellent.

"I expect you are tired and hungry," he said. "Perhaps, before we talk . . ."

"I am more curious than tired."

"Curious?"

"Curiosity is necessary in my field."

Fengriffen nodded.

"How did you come to hear of me, sir?"

"The village doctor recommended you. Doctor Whittle. A good man, well able to mend a broken bone, but unversed in modern technique . . . of . . ."

"Psychology."

"Ah, yes. Psychology. Yes. Doctor Whittle has heard of your studies at Leipzig, and your subsequent success, and suggested I enlist your services."

"That is rare. Few provincial practitioners have faith in my science. Few, indeed, have knowledge of it."

"As I say, Whittle is a good man who recognizes his limitations."

"And the problem?"

Fengriffen gestured meaninglessly.

"A matter of psychology, certainly?"

"I am not sure, sir. A matter in which I am helpless—in which I desperately need help. It is my hope that you may provide it. You will not find me ungrateful . . ."

I held my hand up, palm towards him. It is never good to speak of financial reward in these things.

"Your message mentioned your wife . . ."

"Yes. That is so."

"And something is troubling her?"

He nodded; looked down at his hands, then raised his eyes and stared directly at me.

"I fear she is losing her sanity," he said.

This was more overt than I had come to expect, and we regarded one another for some moments before he shuddered slightly and looked away.

"What causes you to believe this?" I asked.

"There are certain symptoms . . . certain changes in her attitude towards me, alterations in her physical appearance, a disinclination towards all the things which she formerly found interesting. It has the appearance of declining affection, and yet I am positive it is more than that. We were very much in love, you see." He seemed to be repeating this sentence to himself; pondering over the significance or mourning his loss. I waited silently.

"And since her pregnancy, these changes have become more rapid; more apparent."

"That is often normal with pregnancy."

"These are not normal changes. I assure you of that. My wife seems to despise me, almost to fear me. I have often found her staring at me with unconcealed loathing. And, too, I have seen her gazing at herself—at her swollen stomach, you understand—with an inhuman grimace. I fear she does not want my child. If it were merely a case of not loving me . . . But there seems no reason, no justification, and I must fear that her mind has conjured up some falsehood . . ."

"Sir, you must realize . . . I am a doctor and a psychologist. I am not a counsellor upon marriage."

"Yes, yes. I am aware of that. Perhaps it will appear to you that my wife no longer loves me. Perhaps, objectively, it must appear that way. But I know Catherine—I knew her, we were very happy. Her

actions are inexplicable to me. If you can fathom this mystery . . . find, if not a cure, at least some reason behind it . . . ”

“I will do what I can.”

“I can ask no more.”

“Does your wife know why I am here?”

“She knows you are a doctor. I have not informed her of your . . . your field of study. Do you wish to speak with her?”

“In due course. Not directly. She will dine with us?”

“As you think best.”

“Yes. It is often better to observe a person before inquiring into the details of the illness. It makes it easier to form an unprejudiced opinion, you see. If I might be shown to my rooms, now . . . ”

“Yes, of course.”

He sprang up and drew the bell cord. I finished my brandy and rose. Fengriffen was about to say something further, then hesitated as the door opened and a maid appeared.

“Ah, Mrs Lune. Will you show Doctor Pope to his rooms now.”

“Very well, sir,” she said.

I followed her from the library.

Fengriffen’s eyes followed me.

Mrs Lune was an elderly woman with a firm jaw, the sort of servant who attaches herself to a household early in life and remains in their service a lifetime. She preceded me up the wide staircase with a proprietorial stride, thrusting the candlestick like a weapon before us—an ineffective weapon, pitted against the black shadows of this vast edifice, washing a meagre and transient path along which we trod. But Mrs Lune had no need of illumination, for she must have known this house completely, stone and nail, through her long years of service. At the top of the stairs we turned down a hallway or gallery lined with numerous portraits, presumably the Fengriffen family, and all done in dark and sombre tone and attitude. I lagged somewhat behind at this point, interested in the family resemblance which ran through the ancestral chain. Heredity and inherited traits are, naturally enough, very interesting to me and I believe them as valid as environment in the understanding of a personality; believe that a physical resemblance may well offer a hint of further and deeper inheritance, for a man whose blood-lines are potent enough to pass on appearance will naturally pass on the less obvious aspects of his person to some degree.

Mrs Lune, finding that I had dropped back, paused and turned, offering the light to my direction. The stern Fengriffen faces glared at me from the wall, surrounded by massive gilt frames which bore,

at the bottom, the names and dates of the portrayed individuals. They seemed to progress in chronological order, beginning at the head of the staircase, and I moved down the line glancing at the dates and noticing that the canvasses became less antiquated, if none the less grim, as I advanced. They were spaced at regular intervals, as if the purpose were to form a family tree or chart easy to decipher, rather than a gallery of artistic interest. So regular, indeed, was the layout that when I came to a break it impressed itself sharply upon the optical sense.

I looked beyond, and saw that the paintings continued again, and that only one was missing. The wall at this point was slightly lighter than the surroundings in a rectangle the size of the frames, as if the missing picture had but recently been removed. The fact nudged my curiosity.

"There seems to be a missing ancestor," I remarked.

"Yes, sir," Mrs Lune said, and quickly added, "Your room is just here, sir."

"Who might this be?"

She appeared not to hear me; moved off and opened a door leading from the opposite side of the gallery, and stood back waiting for me to enter. Instead I walked past and observed the next portrait; found it to be the penultimate one. It was Peter Fengriffen. The last portrait was of Charles Fengriffen himself. He looked remarkably like his father on canvas—more so, indeed, than he looked in the flesh, for his picture had the lifeless and stiff attitude common to all the portraits. By the simplest logical deduction, it was apparent that the absent picture, being the antepenultimate, had been of Henry Fengriffen, Charles Fengriffen's grandfather.

"What has happened to the missing portrait?" I asked.

"I wouldn't know, sir," said Mrs Lune, and immediately my curiosity moved past idle musing, for it hardly seemed possible that this woman would fail to know such a simple fact concerning the house she managed.

"Perhaps it has been removed for restoration?"

"That might well be, sir," she said.

She would obviously say no more. I shrugged and moved past her into the chambers assigned to me. Mrs Lune entered behind me and proceeded to bustle about making preparations which had already been seen to. The fire was laid and the candles lighted, the heavy curtains drawn and the bed turned down. Mrs Lune scurried about, poking at the wood and patting the bed-clothes; adjusting the curtains an imperceptible fraction, moving a candlestick a trifle.

"Will that be all, sir?" she asked, when everything was to her

satisfaction.

"Yes, this is fine."

She moved to the door, then hesitated.

"Yes, Mrs Lune?"

"You are a doctor, sir?"

"I am."

"You'll forgive my asking? Are you here to see about the mistress?"

Genuine concern played upon her countenance, and I wondered what she had noticed of Catherine Fengriffen's disorder—if, indeed, there was a disorder. Charles Fengriffen had thus far been vague and I debated whether I should attempt to elicit further details from this woman.

"I intend to speak with her, yes," I said.

"You won't be . . . forgive me, sir, but you won't be cutting into her, will you?"

"Cutting?" I repeated, not sure of her meaning.

"You won't be cutting into her body, will you, sir?"

"Good heavens, no. I'm not a surgeon."

"No, I meant . . . Well, boring holes into her skull or anything devilish like that?"

"Trepanning?" I asked, incredulously.

"If that's how it's called."

"Wherever did you get such an idea?"

"Well, I've heard tell of such, sir."

"Here? At the house?"

"Oh no, sir. No, in olden times."

"Very old, I should think. My good woman, that was a prehistoric remedy for letting out evil spirits."

"Yes, sir," she said.

She wasn't at all surprised at the knowledge.

"I assure you, I will perform no physical operations of any nature. I am a . . . a different type of doctor."

Mrs Lune peered at me. The candle she held cast oblong shadows upwards over her face, and her eyes glinted from the darkness of the sockets.

"It's not a doctor as is needed here," she said.

"Whatever do you mean?"

"Oh, sir, it's not for me to say," Mrs Lune replied.

She left the room, closing the door behind her. She closed it rather quickly. I stared at the oak panels for a moment, pondering upon this remarkable conversation. Then I turned to the room. My bag had been brought up and there was hot water in the basin and I began to dress for dinner . . .

Catherine Fengriffen greeted me civilly enough, but with a coolness that seemed more than normal reticence at meeting a stranger . . . a coolness that was all the more surprising in that she gazed full upon my face for an inordinate length of time. It was impossible to judge the emotions which she experienced during this appraisal, whether curiosity or malice or scorn or, possibly, even friendship. I found it difficult to return this equivocal observation. At length, she turned away and stared at her husband in a similar manner. I regarded her thus, in profile; found her a strikingly beautiful woman. And yet, when she had looked at me, I had not been aware of that beauty. It existed in the superficial structure of her countenance, but dimmed in her expression. She was younger than her husband. Quite young, in fact. And yet, even in her youth, there lurked a paradox. Her complexion was smooth and clear and free of wrinkles, and yet she was strained and drawn. Her carriage was erect and graceful, yet one had the impression that she bore a heavy weight upon her shoulders. Her eyes were bright, but it was the brightness of sunlight filtered through an overcast sky. The cords of her neck were prominent as her head turned and she kept her hands clenched at her sides. She was swollen with child, her condition more advanced than I had expected, but she lacked the glow and bloom of pregnancy which normally adds so greatly to a woman's appearance and personality. She stared at Fengriffen every bit as long as she had stared at me as if he, too, were a stranger, and I had ample time to study her features; decided that, despite the tenseness, none of the more overt signs of mental disturbance lurked there.

Quite unexpectedly, she turned back to me.

"You have journeyed from London?" she asked.

I told her that was so.

"A tedious journey," she said, and her tone implied that my travel had been wasted; the journey had been more useless than tiring.

Then we went into the dining room.

It was a spacious chamber with an Adam ceiling and a trestle table of polished oak, at which we were seated some distance apart. Jacob, the old fellow who had admitted me upon my arrival, served us from the sideboard. He was attentive and efficient, if somewhat slowed by age, as he shuffled along the considerable length of the table, serving us in turn. The food was abundant, and the claret superb, but the conversation added nothing to the gracious atmosphere. I made a few idle comments concerning my journey. Fengriffen spoke of his horses without the passion of a true horseman. We discussed, very briefly, the differences we had found in life on the continent.

Catherine said nothing. At one point, while we were talking of Italy, her eyes lighted and she assumed an attitude of interest, but this lasted for only a moment before she lapsed once more into a morose and uninterested expression. I found her behaviour peculiar, but not outstandingly so . . . more preoccupied than disturbed.

Presently, partly through lingering curiosity but also in an attempt to keep the feeble and faltering intercourse alive, I said, "I took notice of the gallery upstairs. It seems a very complete history of the Fengriffens."

Catherine looked up sharply, and Charles occupied himself with his goblet.

"I didn't count them," I continued. "How far back does the representation go?"

Fengriffen thought for a moment.

"Twelve generations," he said.

"A long time."

"Something of a family tradition. I've had my own portrait added. Perhaps you noticed."

"I did, indeed. There is a distinct physical resemblance running through the series. Unusually so."

He nodded.

"I can't say I approve of portraits in such a stilted manner, but I didn't wish to break the continuity."

Catherine had been staring at me once again.

"I find the resemblance rather disturbing," she said.

"Indeed? In what way?"

"It may all be to the good to have an ancient family and be proud of one's blood-lines, but surely a man should be an individual—should be more than another link in a chain of deceased humanity?"

"Every man who ever lived is that," I told her. "That, at least. He may be more, in his own right."

"I express myself badly," Catherine said.

Fengriffen turned his goblet about, cupped in both hands, swirling the wine.

"I mean to say—if such a strong physical resemblance is inherited, does it not follow that other traits will be passed on as well? The bad, as well as the good?"

"Catherine . . ." Fengriffen said, and paused.

"Not necessarily," I said.

She smiled. It was an inordinately bitter smile.

"I bow to superior knowledge," she said.

"I do know something of heredity . . ." I began.

"I'm sure you do, Doctor. I'm really not interested."

Fengriffen turned toward her and was about to speak, but I thought it better to discontinue this line of conversation; I interrupted by saying, "Twelve generations, you said? Is the gallery complete for that time?"

He turned slowly back towards me, his lips still parted with preparation for speech, and nodded.

"I noticed one space which was vacant. I expect that picture has been removed for cleaning or restoration?"

"That is correct. It has been sent away to be repaired. There was a slight accident, actually. One of the servants . . . carrying a candelabrum . . . stumbled . . . you undoubtedly noticed how dark it is in the gallery in the evening . . . stumbled and fell against the painting. One candlestick was forced against the canvas with violence and tore the fabric. It was necessary to have it removed."

"Ah, I wondered."

"Why should you wonder?" Catherine inquired.

"Such is my nature. Which ancestor was it, may I ask?"

"My grandfather," Charles said.

"Henry Fengriffen," said Catherine, as though the words were anathema to her.

Charles scowled.

"I suppose Mrs Lune was the culprit? It seems her domain."

"Yes," Fengriffen said. "Yes, I believe Lune was the one. I don't really recall. An accident, hardly worth remembering, of course."

"Will it be returned soon?"

"Why, I don't really know. I haven't thought. Why do you ask?"

"I take an interest in such work. A layman's interest. I should be interested in inspecting the quality of the restoration."

"Jacob, clear these away," Fengriffen said, gesturing at the remains of our dinner.

"It was rather badly damaged," Catherine said to me. "I shouldn't be surprised if it is beyond repair."

And she smiled again, the same bitter smile, turned upon her husband this time while Jacob hovered between them, bent over at his task, for all the world like some Gothic gargoyle sprung living from the wall.

Catherine excused herself directly the meal was finished and Fengriffen and I retired to the library for coffee and brandy. The wind was rattling the windows ominously, but the fire was burning and the room was pleasant. Fengriffen stood at the window, hands clasped behind his back, and said nothing until Jacob entered with a silver tray and began to pour the coffee.



"Well, Jacob?" Fengriffen asked, without turning around. "What do your joints say? Are we in for a storm?"

"Not tonight, sir. Only been aching a bit through the day. Maybe in two or three days."

"They can say what they like about this modern weather prediction, there's nothing as accurate as old Jacob's joints," Fengriffen said.

Jacob seemed enormously pleased at such praise to the barometer of his bones. He was almost smiling openly as he shuffled from the room. Fengriffen left the window and sat opposite my position, his long legs extended in a relaxed posture, his face composed, his hands clasped before his breast. He looked almost too much at ease.

"Well, you have seen my wife," he began.

I nodded.

"Did her behaviour not strike you as . . . as . . . unusual?"

"A trifle distant, perhaps."

"Ah, but of course, you did not know her before. You have no means of gauging the depth of her change. She was warm and loving, the antithesis of what she is now."

"But a change of that nature hardly implies insanity."

His head was slightly forward, and he regarded me from the tops of his eyes, rather like a practitioner of the gentle art warily circling a formidable antagonist. Here again was the difficulty in my profession. I was employed to find truth, and yet he dreaded truth; I was instructed to correlate facts, and he withheld those facts. There would be more to this case than studying Catherine, it would be necessary to relate those studies to her husband—to judge her mental state objectively, and then to comprehend how that state appeared to Fengriffen's subjective perception. I had little doubt I could discover the dichotomous truth. My doubt was whether those truths would be the solution.

"Oh, I know," Fengriffen said. "You believe she has merely ceased to love me."

Merely? It seemed a curious word.

I said, "If she has ceased to love you, there will be reasons for that, too. But my task is to unravel the wandering paths of the mental process; to untangle the web of disorder. With understanding, often comes cure. But that is all I can do. I cannot persuade her to love you if she does not . . ."

...or would I expect it."

"It might well be necessary for you to change."

He shook his head. I was not sure what he meant to negate by this gesture. A brief silence followed. Fengriffen leaned forward to poke unnecessarily at the fire, shifting the flaming logs. The reflection

danced curious patterns across his cheekbones. I sipped my brandy and coffee and waited. He took a cigar case from his pocket and offered me one, and we made something of a ritual of clipping the ends and lighting up. A light grey haze arose between us, and we looked at one another through this smoke.

"You won't make a hasty judgement?" he asked. "You will speak with Catherine?"

"Of course."

"Alone, I expect?"

"Eventually. But first I should like to listen to you, to form a background upon which to judge. Tell me how you met, how you came to love and marry."

"You think that will be relevant?"

"Anything may be relevant. Who can say? At some point, after some occurrence—or, more likely, series of events—your wife's attitude altered. It is possible to reason back from the fact to the cause, but I believe it more effective to look first for that cause, and apply it to the effect. It may not be difficult. I can stand apart and look objectively upon events in a way that an involved person cannot."

Fengriffen nodded.

"Whether knowing the cause will enable us to change the effect, of course, is a different matter."

Once again his head nodded.

"Tell me as it comes to mind."

Fengriffen drew on his cigar and settled back. His eyes were closed. After a few moments he began to speak . . .

"There is really little to tell," Fengriffen said.

I had no intention of speaking, but my face must have reflected my thoughts, for he raised his hand and said, "Yes, yes, I know. That is for you to decide. Well. I was born here at the house. My mother died while I was yet a child and I remember her only in the barest snatches of recollection, more a mood than an image. I spent my childhood and youth in these surroundings, and I believe, according to the standard judgements, that it was a happy time. That is, I recall more pleasantness than otherwise, more happiness than grief, and the normal pangs of adolescence were mild. But I did not know Catherine in those days, and can see no possible connection. Well, those years passed, as years tend to do. I became a young man. Happiness, to a man, is not the constant that it is in childhood, and I decided I must see something of life. I arranged for rooms in London. My father had no objections to this, indeed thought it was a fine idea, and provided me with adequate income. So I ventured, for the first

time, away from my home."

"I was instantly charmed by an urban existence. I was, I fear, something of a wastrel, spending my time in the pursuit of pleasure and wallowing in the charm of degradation. I realized all this at the time, of course, although I now understand it in a different light. But I might describe myself— might have even at the time—as a gentlemanly rogue or a philanderer or perhaps a mild libertine. I had the typical realizations of a young man and, even more typically, thought them unique unto myself, never dreaming that I was merely experiencing the same perceptions that all men do."

He paused.

"I expect this is the sort of thing you had in mind?" he asked me, without the slightest trace of embarrassment. I was taken by his natural and direct approach to self-analysis, and nodded.

"Yes. Continue."

"I drank rather too heavily, and gambled considerably, although never exceeding my means or getting into debt or difficulty. There was always some sober part of my mind to hold the reins on abandon. Still, it was a wild life. It was London in a vintage year. Many a sunrise did I see through bloodshot eyes and hazy perception, many the turn of the cards upon which I wagered recklessly, believing luck a living entity which stood at my shoulder, many the theatre I attended and played my own little romantic role before the stage, amidst an audience all of whom believed themselves to play the lead. And yes, there were women of dubious virtue, as well."

Fengriffen smiled slightly.

"Catherine knew of those women before we married," he said, anticipating a question which I wouldn't have asked.

"It was while I resided in London that I first made her acquaintance, actually. This was—let me see—it must have been seven or eight years after I first arrived there. My original intention had been to spend a year, two at the most, and then return home. But one tends to fall into a track of existence. Time passed quickly, the year was over before I knew it, two and three years passed at a stretch. Similarity of events grants fleet wings to the passage of time . . . reduces the constant of time's value. I was ensnared. I have no doubts, in retrospect, that I was infinitely bored by my meaningless life . . . so bored that my senses were numbed, and I could not perceive my boredom through my stupor. So, like Hector around the gates of Troy, I was dragged behind the chariot of monotony."

"Then I met Catherine. I was immediately struck by her beauty, but at the time I was interested in less permanent arrangements than marriage, and it was apparent Catherine was not the sort of woman

who . . . you understand? We became friends, and there was great affection between us, but nothing more . . . nothing more . . . nothing spoken, at least, although I expect the seeds of love were sowed long before they were acknowledged. Catherine knew the sort of life I was leading and did not castigate me for it; viewed it with, if anything, an amused tolerance."

He drew on his cigar, as though using it to paragraph his speech, and I watched the long white ash advance up the cylinder, sending tentacles into the leaf.

"And then, quite unexpectedly, my father died."

"I was left in possession of these estates, and with a sense of filial failure. I had not seen my father in several years and animadverted upon my neglect. It brought a sense of reality back into my life, however. I had inherited responsibility. I suddenly understood how jaded I had become with my wild life, and knew it was time to return home."

"I did so. But I had not been here a month before loneliness and celibacy began to interfere with my happiness. I determined to find a wife, and Catherine sprang instantly to mind. She was talented, charming, graceful and beautiful—all that a man could desire. Her financial means were limited but her family was old and of excellent lineage. Money meant little to me, I found myself possessed of far more than I should ever need."

He gestured vaguely at our gracious surroundings with the hand which held the fine Armagnac.

"I believe it meant little to Catherine, as well . . . that money could never enter into her decisions. I loved her and flattered myself that she loved me in return. Perhaps that was my error. I pray to God it wasn't. Although the alternative . . . it may have some bearing . . ."

Fengriffen's face clouded darkly for a moment, as he twisted his thoughts in silence.

"But I ramble. In any event, I loved her. It was curious how I suddenly realized this love—realized that what I had believed to be friendship had been forged in a false image—that my emotions towards her were an anamorphosis which, when viewed correctly, ceased to be deformed by my perception. It was loved revealed, and I longed for her. I journeyed to London immediately and proposed marriage. Catherine accepted me without the slightest hesitation; with a smile and an amused and tolerant glance, as though she had expected my proposal and had been awaiting it patiently. Perhaps my intentions had been more obvious to her than to myself. At any rate, we wed in London, as soon as it could be arranged, and left directly after for our honeymoon on the continent."

"It was a time of extreme happiness. More. It was bliss and ecstasy. I had not the slightest doubt I had married wisely and well . . . married, I might say, to perfection. Catherine proved all I could have desired, and more. My loved increased beyond restriction, beyond limitation, beyond the capacity of thought. And she responded to my love in the same manner, until we were linked together by bonds greater than either emotion or ratiocination; greater than the sum of both. We travelled through France and Italy at a leisurely pace, stopping when it struck our fancy and taking several months longer than we had intended. We shared the pleasures of new discoveries without need of words, with our own communication—a smile, the tender pressure of her hand, a glance—it was sufficient to send a deluge of feeling cascading between our minds and hearts. We needed no one else, avoided other people for the most part, sought private experience and beauty and found it everywhere—found it in the caress of a Mediterranean breeze, the colour of a cloud, the eternity of a shapeless lump of rock. We ventured to the museums and appreciated the subtle touch of the old masters, and then the wind would stir Catherine's hair along her neck and all the talent and glory of Rubens or Botticelli was as nothing to her splendour. She was the brilliance in the chiaroscuro of life. She was mystery understood, reflecting love with a radiance which would shame the moon into darkness . . . Ah, but why attempt to express a thing you have not known? You understand? We were in love without boundaries."

Fengriffen leaned towards me.

"And then, eventually, it was necessary to return to manage my estates. Had I known, I would have forsaken all. I would willingly have lived as a peasant on some rocky precipice, a shepherd in some rustic cabin, a fisherman on a stormy sea. But I did not know. Damn me, I could not have known. And so we returned."

"And that was when the change began."

His voice hardened and his face tightened. The ash dropped from his cigar, unheeded, and fragmented against his well-polished boot.

"I can place it to the second, you see."

I raised my eyebrows. He failed to see my gesture, for his eyes were turned inwards. He was looking at the past, recorded in his mind, lurking and lingering in the shadows—cowled shapes, silently waiting for the moment when defences are down, and they may rush out to deal a savage wound. The recollections of regret, those parasites that torment their host, and rage like dragons through the brain. I felt less objective than befits my profession.

"It was the very moment that she first looked upon Fengriffen House," he said, at length. "You have seen the house. It is impressive

and, somehow, eerie. Even I, who spent all my childhood roaming through these grounds and rooms, often feel a strange mood pervading the walls themselves. Yet it is a house, no more. The mood stems from the mind. God knows it was the furthest thing from my thoughts on the evening I brought my bride home—an evening rather like this one, in fact. The sky was flaming and the house was framed against the sunset. We were in an open carriage, winding through the hills, and I looked fondly at my bride, wishing to witness her first reaction to her home; hoping she would be pleased. I knew, of course, the exact point when the road turned past a shoulder of barren land and left the view unhindered. Our carriage made that turn, and suddenly Catherine stiffened and shuddered. Her lips parted and she gave an involuntary gasp. I believed she had taken a chill, and drew her to me; felt her trembling; asked what was wrong. She would not answer me. She continued to stare towards the house with an expression difficult of description . . . an impression of foreboding, perhaps. But, whatever had caused it, it was from that moment that the change began.”

Fengriffen leaned back again, his senses once more in the present; emerged from the forest of recall.

“I see,” I told him. “And I do not see. Has she ever told you what it was she felt upon first sighting the house?”

“Never. I do not believe she knows, herself. It was a feeling, unique but intangible.”

“Intangible. Yes, I felt something of that myself.”

“There are legends, of course,” he said, with a gesture of deprecation. “What ancient home is without its ghosts, its haunts and superstitions? I pay them no mind, certainly. The servants believe them, I expect. And, I fear, Catherine has come to believe them as well. But, at the time when she first saw the house, she could not have known of the legends, which seems to make them an after-effect and irrelevant; a symptom rather than a cause.”

“What are these legends?”

“They are nonsense. I shan’t waste your time with them—cannot, in truth, recall the details myself. The point is, from that very instant, and without any connection, Catherine began to draw away from me. She became reticent and silent; took long solitary walks and spent hours alone in her room, or here, locked in the library. Books had never seemed to interest her very much before, and the obvious assumption was that she no longer wished to be with me. All the pleasures we had shared ceased to exist. I tried, at first, to ignore the change—to force myself to think it the normal way in which a marriage settles after the first passion; after the romance of the honey-

moon has become a daily pattern of necessity. But I could deceive myself only so long. Eventually I had to admit that her love had changed; to attempt to find the reasons. Catherine would not speak of it, however. I asked her, begged her to tell me what was wrong. She would not even admit to a change. I told her we could go away again, if that would please her—told her that we could leave instantly, retracing the paths where we had found such happiness—that her love was all that mattered to me, and I would gladly have dressed in rags and torn a living from the soil with naked hands as long as that love existed. She merely shook her head, rather sadly, and—the only time she came close to admitting the change—said that it was too late, and that the past could never be recaptured. And then she left me, standing helpless and hopeless and seeking desperately for some hint or clue amidst my grief. I could only hope that time, that greatest of all healers, would undo the unknown damage. But time did not heal. Time served against me. By the time that we knew Catherine was with child, the change had become so pronounced that it was apparent, even to the servants, that something was wrong. I have heard them discussing it amongst themselves. Can you imagine, sir, the agony of overhearing such intercourse? My wife will no longer even admit me to her room. I have done nothing, to my knowledge, to offend her—am willing to make any sacrifice at her slightest whim. And she refuses even sacrifice. I am desperate, sir.”

And it was a desperate and beseeching glance he turned upon me, waiting for me to speak. I wished I could have found words of encouragement, but it was too early and I knew too little; would have thought the most likely answer was the simplest—that she no longer loved him, and that his own fancy had contrived this sudden change, protecting his emotions by inventing the balm of hope.

“You have told me everything?” I asked.

He nodded, slowly.

“You have no idea as to the cause?”

“None. Catherine has mentioned the legends, and has made it clear that she despises this house, but that seems to bear no relation to her feelings towards me. I have offered to take her from here, and she has refused.”

“The legends. Yes. Well, they could have affected her in this manner, one supposes. If she has that turn of mind—has connected you with the house, and all the hatred and fears which have developed in relation to it.”

“If only it were that simple . . .”

“No, Fengriffen. Not simple. It would scarcely be a rational judgement, but it could be a deep connection, difficult to sever.”

"I understand that, sir. But I fear certain possibilities more than I fear irrational connections within her mind. It is selfish, of course. But love is a selfish thing—necessarily so, since it is reflection. But other possibilities . . . what I mean is . . . I have mentioned, I believe, Catherine's financial circumstances when we met. Is it possible she wed me for wealth, loved me superficially in the gaiety of London and the brief happiness abroad, and then found her feelings too shallow to cope with life in this secluded place? That she began to regret her marriage and then, when she became pregnant, she saw it as a hindrance to escape? Saw her route to freedom blocked by her swollen womb?"

"Is that what you believe?"

He started to reply, then clamped his lips together; said, through clenched teeth, "No, damn it. No."

"If it is so, there is little I can do."

"You can find the truth. I must know."

I nodded. I felt very sorry for this man.

"I will speak with your wife tomorrow," I said.

"And, waiting, I will know how Aegeus felt, waiting on that rocky coast for his son to return—praying that you will raise a white sail, sir . . ."

But I feared it would be black . . .

That night, I found sleep elusive. Hypnos is a fleeting god when the mind is aroused, and Fengriffen's tale had moved me to feeling. I sat at the window, smoking a pipe and looking across the moonlit moors. The landscape was silent and awesome, blocked in patterns of silver and black. Thoughts ran at random through my brain. I was not seeking a solution—knew there could be no more than conjecture, as yet, but the thoughts had a will of their own, tempting me with vague urgings; telling me at one moment that it was obvious she did not love him, and at the next that there was some mystery far deeper to be disclosed. I recalled Mrs Lune's curious comments, remembered the missing portrait and Catherine's bitter smile, thought of the strange chill which had moved me when I first saw the house. Yet I made no effort at correlating these factors. They moved at a level beneath the surface of ratiocination, and my controlled thoughts were superficial. I looked at the moors and I smoked. My pipe burned out and I filled a second, lit it, tamping it down carefully, and fired it again, until it was burning evenly and the smoke was cool. Tobacco is an ally of contentment, and I told myself I must be content, with the cheerful blaze still in the grate and the wind howling ineffectively outside, shaking the trees in a fury but unable to get to me—indeed, defeating its purpose as, in rage, it sucked the draught up the chimney



and caused my fire to burn more freely. I was able to judge the force of that wind by regarding the shadows beneath the trees. The filigreed moonlight shifted and blurred, laying silver tapestries beneath the limbs. It was hypnotic. I lost awareness of time as I studied the moving shadows. My second pipe went out. I pulled thoughtlessly at the mouthpiece. My eyes grew heavy. And then, gradually, I found myself looking at a different shadow. I must have observed it for some time before I realized it was more than the wind snatching the trees. For this shape had advanced beyond the trees, and it brought a shadow of its own; moved near to the house and then paused. I snapped to alertness. I stared at this dark form and had the grotesque impression that, whatever it was, it was staring back at me. A finger of ice tapped up the articulation of my backbone, leaving me rigid in its wake. And then the shape was gone.

I leaned closer to the window, but there was nothing there.

If it had been, it was gone.

A jest of deceptive perception, I told myself.

And then, from the trees, came the unearthly howl of a dog—a sudden and rising sound which ceased as abruptly as it had begun, in a way no dog wilfully terminates its cry.

A dog, I told myself. No more.

But strange formless doubts accompanied me to my bed that night . . .

I found Catherine walking in the gardens.

It was early and a damp mist clung to her, so that she appeared to drift over the ground. I had to quicken my stride to overtake her, and she did not seem aware of my approach, gazing abstractedly into the distance. And yet, when I spoke, she was not startled. She seemed to have been expecting me. She nodded and I fell into step beside her. She was wrapped in a tweed cloak and wore stout walking shoes, yet her manner implied more than a sensible stroll before breakfast, more suited to the clinging mist than the heavy cloak. We moved on for a short distance, without speaking; came to a shattered stump from which the fallen trunk still angled to the earth, and Catherine sat upon it.

“Why have you come here, Doctor?” she asked.

“Your husband summoned me.”

“Is my husband ill?” She smiled slightly.

I found a loose tongue of bark, and pulled a strip from the dead tree. The wood beneath had not yet begun to rot.

“Charles believes me insane,” she said.

“Not insane, no. Unhappy.”

“And can you treat unhappiness? Is there some arcane herb to cure

it? Some unguent or liniment to make me content? Some leech to draw sadness from my soul?"

"You are unhappy, then?"

"Surely you don't ask me to diagnose my own sickness?"

"I ask you to talk with me."

"Of what?"

"Whatever you choose."

"Of unhappiness?"

"If you like."

She shrugged. I shredded the strip of bark and let the fragments drift away on the mist. The sun was rising now, distorted by the dampness and applying a pastel wash to the landscape. Drops of moisture sparkled from the amaranthine blooms and gathered brilliance at our feet. Catherine was silent for a time. She seemed indifferent to her surroundings, to me, even to her own sensations. Then she shrugged a second time, and looked up at me.

"What is the harm?" she asked. "What is the good, certainly, but what harm in speaking? You are right. Charles is right. I am immensely unhappy. It is no one's fault, not even my own. I am accursed."

I looked at her rather more sharply than I had intended.

"A fanciful word? Perhaps. Or do you think it an expression selected by an infected mind?"

"Words are symbols. No more."

"Yes," she said. "Yes, there are far worse things than words."

"Will you tell me?"

She began to tell her tale . . .

"I love Charles with my heart," she said. "But what is the heart? It beats so many times a day, it stops. So it is with love. My heart still beats and I still love. Sooner or later . . . rather sooner, I fancy, it will stop. But I love my husband and I pity him. I know the agony my behaviour must cause him. The very fact of your presence here is proof of his pain. And yet, I am helpless to avoid it. My love is not lessened, but my responses are. Responses are not governed by that pounding organ; reactions are not carried through the bloodstream. I cannot tell Charles of my feelings. Confession is impossible for me. I feel as an unfaithful woman must feel . . . a woman who continues to be devoted to her husband and yet is driven by some prepotent whim into infidelity."

She shook her head.

"No, I have not been unfaithful," she said. "Not in the common sense of such words. But here again we have symbols, and I have been unfaithful in a far more terrible way than words can encom-

pass. Words that I can use. Infidelity is a living entity within this house, an organism dwelling in the walls themselves. The instant I first looked upon these wretched towers and spires, these ghastly rocks rising from the desolate moors . . . You, sir, have seen this place. Did you not feel the evil?"

I did not reply.

"Ah! Blind men of science. I know no science, and therefore wear no blinders. Truth cannot penetrate the shell of false knowledge which foolish men have erected in the name of progress. But I am not hindered by this. When this house first came into view, I shivered. I felt a shaft of cold enter my body. Charles drew me to him; inquired as to my trembling, and what could I tell him? It was a feeling, the symbols were inadequate. Or are feelings symbols as well?"

"Perhaps they indicate."

"Yes. Well, this feeling indicated. If only I had known what it indicated, I would never have entered the house. But I did not know. I told myself I was being ridiculous, and I passed through those loathsome portals. Inside, with the fires laid and the candles burning, it was momentarily better. For a while I became more cheerful, and thought of my fear as irrational and absurd; tried to believe I had, as Charles suggested, merely taken a chill. Then the other indicators began to appear. Mrs Lune kept regarding me with eyes of pure and simple pity; looked at me as one might some piteously malformed infant, or some innocent prisoner unjustly doomed to the gallows. This threw my husband into gloom. He shot Mrs Lune a fierce glance which I was not supposed to notice, and she left. He sat brooding, his chin lowered to his chest. It was the first time I had ever seen Charles other than gay and cheerful, and I inquired about his mood. When he glanced up at me, for an instant, I saw something in his expression which might well have been fear. But he, as I had been, was unable to express his feelings. He said he was merely tired after our journey, and suggested that we retire . . ."

Catherine paused. I had taken my tobacco pouch out, and begged permission to smoke. She granted it. I dropped the dark, dry tobacco carefully into the bowl and levelled it with my thumb; lit it and added a grey haze to the heavy air. The mist was sinking low now and the sky was lightening. Clouds hung like sheepskins against an El Greco heaven.

"I had been given a separate room," she said. "I did not wish a room apart from my husband, but modesty is a powerful restraining force. I found it impossible to speak of such desires . . . do not know how it is that I am able to speak thus to you, sir . . ."

"I am a doctor."

"A curious sort of doctor, I imagine . . . to listen to events as if they were symptoms."

"There are certain new methods . . ."

She raised her slender hand.

"No matter. It is nothing to me. But I am speaking . . . shall I continue?"

I nodded, the pipe in my teeth.

"That first night, Charles slept in my room, and all was well but for the nagging memory of my feelings. But in the morning, alone at my toilet, I once again experienced that dread chill. It enveloped me. It was much greater than it had been in the carriage, and different . . . did not seem to originate from within, but to be an external circumstance. It was as if the atmosphere were closing in to crush and freeze my body. For long and terrible moments I was helpless in the grasp of this sensation. I could neither move, nor speak. But I determined to struggle against it; told myself it was an irrational foreboding, nothing more. I force myself—it took great effort, sir . . . I forced myself to rise from the table and move to the window, willing my limbs to obey, my muscles to function, as one moves through deep water. Feeling as if I would soon suffocate, I threw open the window and stood, gasping for air. Gradually, the feeling began to subside. I could feel it, a physical thing, being drawn from me towards the window. The cocoon of cold slipped from my flesh, the curtains quivered, and then I was left trembling, gazing out across the bleak moors. I concentrated on the view, to keep my mind from other tracks. They were—they are—beautiful. Stark and hard and lonely, but tranquil and peaceful as well. A sense of eternity is engraved in the rugged contours. Some of this peace reached out for me, and I determined that I would grow to love this land as much as did my husband—hung suspended in the balance between this desire, and the fear of—of whatever caused my fear . . ."

"Ah, but this is meaningless to you—to one who has not experienced the sensation."

"No, not meaningless. Somewhere there is a key, if we can find it . . . a Rosetta Stone to unlock the mystery, to decipher the language of the mind."

"It is not within my mind, sir."

I chose not to comment on this point, at the moment. I wished her to continue. But she stood up, drawing her cloak around her, and the wind tossed her golden hair in wild disarray.

"Come, let us walk," she said.

I nodded.

"I wish to show you the place where I walked that morning . . . my

first morning at Fengriffen House; where I strolled in solitude, attempting to let the peacefulness seep into me, determined to be at ease and grow accustomed to my new home . . .”

I followed her around the fallen tree.

“An ill advised attempt,” she said.

We followed an almost non-existent path, overgrown and broken, which wound from the gardens across a field of gorse and heather and thorn. I walked slightly behind Catherine. She had a determined stride and erect carriage, and moved rather more quickly than is normal for a woman in her condition. The mist had been torn now, scattered and drawn to the sky, and the clouds were increasing and darkening; dividing and joining, drawing slender and then breaking apart like monocellular creatures in an act of reproduction. And they were reproducing. The sky had become overcast, only a few wedges of blue were visible, and the gaps were closing. I wondered, vaguely, how Jacob's joints were reacting. The field ended in a ragged line of trees, the limbs and trunks tortured into grotesque angles by the wind, and the ground beneath mottled with filtered sunlight. Catherine headed for this woodland. The ground was more broken here, and I moved to her side and offered my arm, but she did not take notice.

She moved directly into the trees. Large rocks were entangled in the roots on either side, but Catherine followed a narrow opening, passing through shadows and shafts of light, certain of her bearings.

Suddenly she stopped, gesturing with one hand.

I moved past her, and found myself in a graveyard.

It startled me, for some reason. Catherine was staring at me, smiling. It was not a pleasant smile, and her hand was still extended in the gesture towards the tombstones. These slabs of granite and marble were sunken into the earth, ancient and discoloured as the decaying teeth of dragons. They seemed to signify rot and corruption. They were not well cared for, and there was no apparent order in the arrangement of the graves . . . gravity and time were working their ways upon this place.

“This is where my walk brought me,” Catherine said.

“I sought peace and tranquillity, and fate guided me to these forsaken tombs . . . this place of memory and sadness, where my husband's ancestors are interred, and where some day my earthly remains will be left to moulder. Not a pleasant thought, Doctor. Not the conversation you might expect from a young woman with child. But I have no fear of death now; would welcome it, if it truly brings oblivion. At that time, I did not have such thoughts. I saw it as an omen,

however. It frightened me, and yet something kept me from fleeing. I wandered among these odious monuments to Thanatos as though my steps were preordained. I glanced at the stones, but moved on . . . ”

As Catherine spoke, she advanced into the graveyard.

“See, here is the grave of Charles’ father. It is quite recent, the stone has not yet sunk into the earth. The coffin will still be intact. Perhaps the corpse will not yet have rotted, perhaps shards of flesh will still drip from the bones. How long does corruption take, Doctor?”

Despite the grisly aspects of her subject, her voice was detached and calm. She continued to move past the headstones. I noticed how deeply her stout walking shoes pressed into the dark earth; had a ghastly image of some force, drawing her down towards the graves, reaching up through the earth to grasp at her ankles. Or was the force above, pressing down upon her sagging shoulders? I wished to persuade her to leave this morbid place, and strode after her.

Suddenly she halted.

“And here is the sepulchre of Charles’ grandfather,” she said. “The monument remaining to a man who governed and ruled and . . . It is no more than rough cut stone, you see? Not the *only thing* he left to his ancestors . . . ”

It was an arched slab of granite, set with a brass plate. The weeds had begun to overgrow the stone, but the inscription was still decipherable. Henry Fengriffen had lived to a ripe age, and the rectangular outline of the grave had settled at a lower level than the surrounding soil-seemed darker within the boundaries. Catherine stepped directly onto this lowered patch and passed her hand across the dome of the tombstone. Her face contorted with an expression of loathing—an expression far too intense to signify hatred or fear, but rather as her countenance might have reacted had she been looking at the contents of the opened crypt itself. I stared at her, fascinated; remembering that it was Henry Fengriffen’s portrait that had met with an accident.

“Catherine . . . ” I said, softly.

She did not notice my voice. She turned and leaned against the stone, and the black earth oozed at her feet.

“Something drew me to this very tombstone,” she said. “I knew nothing of the legend then. And yet I passed the others with scarcely a glance, directed to this particular grave by some magnetism of the senses. Everything was clouded, I saw only the stone. Around it the world was hazy, but this rock stood out, illuminated in my vision. I approached from this side . . . ”

Her calm was gone now. Her eyes were wide, turned towards me but not seeing me.

"Suddenly, from behind the tombstone, a face rushed up at me! A hideous face with hollow eyes, and a red smear running upwards from the corner of the mouth to the cheekbone . . . a smear the colour of blood, as though he had been tearing into raw flesh. I staggered back and cried out. Never have I known such horror. I did not believe it a human form; thought it some fiend, perhaps some ghou! feeding upon the corpses. I tried to rip my eyes from this manifestation of evil, but they were held rigid in their sockets; wished to escape into unconsciousness, but could not faint; wished to scream, but found my vocal chords bound in a knot. This face turned upon me. The eyes glowed from the shadows, the mouth twisted in a leer, showing blackened teeth—teeth like those tombstones, wide spaced and rotting. For an eternity we looked at one another, and then, abruptly, he had vanished into the trees. His figure was tall and gaunt, swathed in rags of fur and leather. I could hear his passage through the undergrowth. Then all was silent. I was unable to move. I was petrified. Time had no meaning, even my heart was frozen. I stood that way for God knows how long, and then suddenly my reflexes returned, my muscles melted into obedience, and I fled back to the house . . ."

"From that moment, all hopes of ever finding peace at this place were shattered . . . I left the mortal remains of my hopes to moulder in this graveyard . . ."

Catherine laughed.

Despite myself, I looked at the trees behind the stone. She saw my glance, and laughed harder; leaned back until she was actually seated upon the headstone.

"Well, Doctor? What does your learning tell us?"

"This apparition . . ." I began.

"Oh, it was no apparition. The creature exists. It is even human, one supposes."

"You know this?"

She nodded.

"I have seen it since," she said.

"Then surely it is some wretched man dwelling in these woods. A poacher, perhaps. A hermit . . ."

"But, Doctor . . . You assume too quickly. Often, I have found, doctors are prone to that blunder. But I knew it was real, even then. When I reached the house I went to my room and lay for several hours in cold dread. Eventually, I summoned my strength and went downstairs. Charles was in the library. I told him what had happened,

and watched his jaws tighten; watched the skin grow white across his cheekbones. I asked if he knew who the creature was, and at first he did not reply. I could read his thoughts; knew he was trying to decide what to tell me. Finally, he said that the man was gamekeeper, and that I need not be afraid. Yet, even as he said this, I could see the fear which enveloped him. I sat beside him and took his hand; found it cold. But he would tell me no more."

"A woman of curious disposition I have always been, but it was far more than curious speculation which drove me to discover the secret of this mysterious and hideous man. I sensed that, in some way, he was inextricably bound to my fate."

"I summoned Mrs Lune to my room. That good woman arrived, and I managed to assume an appearance of calm and keep emotion from my voice. I merely mentioned that I had seen this man on my walk and asked if she had any idea who he might be. At the moment I described the red mark on his face, Mrs Lune's kind solid face dissolved. She was near to tears. She said she would rather not speak of it. I insisted, forcing sternness and annoyance which I did not feel to enter my voice."

"The Woodsman", Mrs Lune said."

"But who is he? Is he a servant?" "She shook her head and muttered something to herself."

"Then why is he on my husband's lands?" I demanded."

"Mrs Lune's shoulders quivered. I asked the question again, crossly; wishing in no way to cause her anxiety or pain, but feeling that I must know the truth."

"She said, 'I don't rightly know. Really I don't. I've heard tell as he's inherited the right to live in the woods . . . in a cabin . . . where his father lived before . . .'"

"But why should this be?"

"Mrs Lune wrung her hands together; said, 'Some injustice . . . in the past. I've heard it spoken of. Something that the master's grandfather did which wasn't . . . which hadn't ought to have been done. And then he wrote it in his will that they had the right to live on these lands always . . .'"

"What was this injustice?"

"I can't say, Madam."

"Come, tell me."

"I cannot. I don't know. God help me, I don't. Please, Madam . . . that's all as I've heard whispered . . ."

"And despite both coaxing and threatening, I could learn nothing more from Mrs Lune . . ."

"She seems a superstitious woman," I said. "Surely you have not



let such talk disturb you? These people believe in legends and tales . . . ”

Catherine shook her head.

“Disturbed,” she said. “Yes, it disturbed me. But here, again, you do not know. I was determined to know what this legend was. I had to know. I dismissed Lune, much to her relief, and pondered over what little I knew; decided that I would ask Charles when he came to my room that night—more than ask, I intended to demand the truth. It was compulsive. I had to know how this legend and that odious creature affected me. I believed that, with knowledge, I would be able to defend myself against this influx of dread and fear, this feeling of absolute despair. I still feel that, had I been forewarned . . . No, that is untrue. It was already too late.”

The wind was rising with the sun. It toyed with the gnarled trees and shifted the slender shadows along the aging monoliths. Somewhere distant a small animal scurried through the under-growth and a solitary bird was describing an arc high above. Perhaps the rodent scurried because it, too, saw this gliding hunger against the clouds. I noticed these things, for I had succeeded in standing my emotions aside; listening to Catherine objectively so that external events and appearances were magnified in my perception—so that my senses rushed in to fill the void where emotion should have reigned. I was aware of her voice, not in relation to my sensations, but played against a natural background. The heavy scent of rich earth, mingling with the heavy air; the flickering play of light and shade; the ponderous motion of laden clouds—all these assumed a reality beyond the natural and formed the set upon which Catherine’s monologue was enacted.

“Charles did not come to my room,” she said.

“I have found that when my husband is disturbed or worried, he seeks physical effort. He has always been that way. I expect it is a good way to be. He drives his body to fatigue, and releases his mind. Well, he was disturbed that day. He spent the afternoon and early evening riding with the hounds, following a mad course at breakneck speed and allowing no moments for thought. I waited for him to return. Several times I saw him in the distance, leaping the stiles or thundering at full gallop across the fields. When he returned the horse was lathered to a frenzy, and Charles was exhausted. He trifled with dinner and then retired to his own room. I was forced to do the same, and lay tossing restlessly in my own bed. I was disappointed and impatient, but hardly angry. I am a passionate woman, but not irrational; my passion is not aroused before my husband expresses desire. And

such were my sleepless thoughts that it was not passion which caused me to wish my husband were at my side. I speak of desire because . . . well, because . . . ”

“Because?”

Catherine shrugged.

“It is a basic function of mankind,” I said.

“It is more than that. Never mind. Let me continue . . . ”

I could not help but wonder at the significance of this reference to physical need, but chose not to press the issue. She was talking freely, and I did not dare tempt her mind from the track.

“Inevitably, my thoughts turned to the woodsman. I saw his face, haunting me. I closed my eyes and found the vision even stronger when trapped behind the lids. All the details were there, more graphic in my mind than when I had actually looked at him in the flesh. Once again I saw that frightful visage rise up from behind the tombstone; saw that birthmark so much like blood from a grisly feast, those blasted and shattered stumps within his mouth and the inhuman eyes turn towards me. I could not drive the image from my feverish brain. I could think of nothing else. For hours I lay there, drenched with cold perspiration and staring at the ceiling while seeing the woodsman . . . ”

“At long last, I felt sleep begin to creep over me. I tried to accept it. My mind dimmed, then snapped awake once more. Objects in the room seemed to draw towards me, swelling out of all proportion, and then recede into darkness. Gradually I sank into a state of torpor. The mind can bear just so much turmoil, and then it erects the protective barrier of insensibility. Values cease to have meaning, indifferent slumber stands sentry over sanity . . . ”

“And then it came.”

“It was the same feeling I had felt in the morning, but magnified a hundred times. It was far more than a rushing of air, a closing of the atmosphere. There was a sound at the window, the curtains billowed inwards, and then the thing raged within the room, swirling in the corners, blindly seeking and assembling. It gathered above my bed. It descended upon me . . . a touch of air so heavy and so cold that it had substance. It wrapped itself about my body like a living thing, holding my limbs motionless and piercing my breast until my heart itself was impaled. I could not move, I could not cry out. My eyes were open wide, I was fully awake, but totally helpless in this supernatural grip.”

“I cannot say how long I endured this frozen embrace. It seemed hours, perhaps it was minutes, but for this time I was captive, a prisoner of forces beyond comprehension. And then, finally, it seeped

from me. I could feel the pressure lessen, the chill grow faint, the rushing sound abate gradually until it was gone, and I screamed . . . ”

“I screamed again and again, mad with terror and awakening the household. I was no longer held fast, and yet I could not move . . . my own fear had taken over the function of deadening my limbs.”

“Charles was the first to enter.”

“He stood in the doorway, wild-eyed, his hair dishevelled, holding a pistol. His noble head swung from side to side as he sought a target. Mrs Lune appeared behind him, one hand clasped at her throat. Her throat writhed like a snake beneath her fingers. “The curse, the curse . . . ” she babbled, over and over, until Charles pushed her roughly aside and closed the door.

“He came to the bed, attempting to conceal the pistol beneath his dressing gown, and sat beside me; took my hand and looked into my eyes. I knew how much effort was necessary for him to appear calm. He stroked my hair and spoke softly, and I told him of what had occurred, my words falling out in mad confusion and disorder. He attempted to quiet me; told me I must have been dreaming, while I clung to him and begged him not leave me alone. Eventually I managed to gain some semblance of control. More for Charles’ sake than my own—all peace of mind had fled from me forever in those timeless moments, in the grasp of intangible talons—I let him believe he had convinced me . . . let him think it had been a nightmare.”

“And yet, even then, we both knew better . . . ”

Catherine pressed her toe into the damp earth, leaving a sharp impression at which she gazed with interest.

“And yet,” I said, and my voice stumbled at some obstacle in my mouth. “And yet it must have been a dream.”

Catherine raised a look of disdain and scorn.

“A dream caused by your disturbed and feverish state of mind . . . ”

“Of course,” she said. “A dream. Can you call me of a dream, man of science?”

“If we can find the root of the dream. Dreams may appear reality. The line of demarcation is fine, and when the mind is intoxicated with emotion . . . ”

“But it was no dream,” she said. “It was real. That was the first time, but not the only time. Many times since have I felt that frozen touch. And, one time, Charles came again to my room . . . but no matter.”

She leaned toward me.

“I am wrong to mock your ignorance,” she said. “I know you wish to help me. But I know, too, that you cannot help me. No living man can.”

Her eyes burned, windows on the inferno which was melting her mind.

"One more thing I will tell you," she said.

I waited.

"The next day, I went into the woods and sought out the woodsman . . ."

"Yes, I went alone into the middle of the forest and I sought that base mockery of all that is human . . . sought him and found him."

She grimaced.

I regarded her incredulously, appalled.

"It was not courage, or bravery," she said. "I had no choice. It was compulsion. I went alone and unarmed along the overgrown trail without the slightest doubt in my mind that I would find him. It was certainty. I walked straight to his wretched hovel without a single mistake, although I had never been in those woods before and there were many trails intersecting. He lived in the middle, where it is thickest and darkest. I came to a clearing, and there was the man's cabin. I stood in the trees for perhaps half an hour, gazing at the ill-kept structure. It did not appear real—far less real than the experience you believe to be a dream. I felt no fear at this point. My legs rebelled and for a time refused to carry me forwards, but my mind felt nothing of this. And, at length, I walked into the clearing and approached the door. It was open. The woodsman was within, crouched over a filthy pot suspended over the fire. His brutish dog was beside him. Both man and beast looked at me, and neither appeared surprised at my appearance in the doorway. The dog raised his lip, but made no sound. The man did not speak. His demeanour was not so repulsive, somehow, in his own foul den. I felt something akin to pity."

"I told him I wished to speak with him."

"He did not reply; lifted a wooden spoon and stirred the odious contents of his pot. I entered and stood beside him. The contents of the pot bubbled and cast fetid fumes from the greasy surface. Foul odours rose, too, from his unwashed body and filthy rags. I felt nauseous and dizzy, but determined. I sat—actually sat—upon the bare floor beside him, and asked him of the legend. It seems impossible, and yet at the time it was natural; it was necessary. He seemed to debate, if such a mind is capable of abstract thought, and then, still turning the spoon sluggishly through his ghastly stew, he began to speak . . ."

"He told me, in coarse language and crude accents, of the legend and the curse . . ."

Catherine lowered her voice, but raised her eyes.

"And there I came to know my fate . . ."

A long silence—a silence befitting our sepulchral surroundings—followed these words. No animals darted through the undergrowth now; the bird of prey had dropped towards the horizon and taken the sound of the wind with him. It was so still that I fancied I might be able to hear the vermicular scavengers which, bloated and gorged, performed their necrophagous task beneath our feet. I shuddered at the thought.

Catherine continued to stare at me, judging my reaction.

"And the legend?" I whispered.

She shook her head.

"Of that, I will say no more. It faults my husband's ancestors, and makes a jest of innocence. It is a tale of flagiticusness which I cannot repeat."

She rose from the tombstone and the wind returned suddenly to gather her golden hair and pluck at her cloak.

"I am tired now. I have said enough."

"I will walk back with you."

"As you wish."

She turned. For an instant I believed she intended to address the tombstone or the grave, but then she turned once more and brushed past me. She walked quickly. I overtook her and once again she ignored my arm. We passed through the trees and out into the open field. The stables were at the far end, and the house towered above and beyond. Catherine headed towards the house, paralleling the gardens by this direct route. Fengriffen appeared, walking towards the stables, but if he noticed us he gave no sign. He walked with a preoccupied air. Catherine glanced at him, then looked away.

"Well, have I incriminated myself?" she asked.

"I don't understand."

She turned, stopping so abruptly that we nearly collided; gripped my arm and looked, intensely and searchingly, into my face.

"Am I mad?" she asked.

It was rhetorical.

Catherine did not think so.

And I knew not what to think.

I went up to my room, but the moment the door was closed behind me I was taken with a restlessness, an urge to action or motion. I filled one of my briars and tried to channel this feeling into contemplation; to piece together what I had learned and discover, in theory at least, how a dream and a rustic woodsman and a legend of

wickedness could combine to the sum of Catherine's disturbed state; could result in loss of love for her husband, who seemed in no way responsible. But the evidence was not sufficient, and I felt positive that I had not been given all the relevant details by either Fengriffen or his wife. This is a grave difficulty in my profession, for people place hope without placing trust. And, despite my efforts, I was unable to forge my restlessness into rational force.

I stood up and wandered to the window.

The next logical step, I believed, was to discover what this legend consisted of. It had obviously affected Catherine tragically, although it was impossible to know whether that effect had been due to the content of the legend itself, or to the peculiar method by which it had been revealed to her. From my window, looking past the far wing of the house, I could see the stables. Fengriffen was still there, talking to the groom, and I contemplated asking him what this legend was. And yet, he denied belief in superstition, dismissed such things with impatience, and would not understand how a thing need not be true to be valid. If he were to reveal the legend to me, it would surely be modified by his own beliefs and would scarcely be the same tale that Catherine had heard. For that I would need, at the very least, objectivity. And who, involved in this, could be objective?

And at best?

The woodsman.

I glanced up at the sky, wondering if the impending storm would hold off long enough for a visit to that hovel in the woods— perhaps hoping for black and swollen clouds, for I did not relish the thought. I had to scoff at my own timidity; to tell myself that Catherine had ventured there before me, alone and unprotected and in the final stages of pregnancy. I turned my gaze towards those woods. The sky was low with unbroken clouds, but I refuse to allow myself that excuse. It was in the woods I must seek the clue.

I donned a heavy cape of Scottish wool and changed my light stick for a heavy cudgel which I had purchased in the Swiss Alps. As my hand closed upon the thick shaft I felt a touch of irony in the fact that a man of science should take heart and comfort from a length of carved hardwood. Yet, such is man, and to say that a man knows himself, is to say that he has looked into a bottomless chasm and claimed discovery . . .

Fengriffen was watching while the groom saddled his horse. He was immaculate in finely tailored riding clothing, absent-mindedly slapping his crop against a gleaming boot. My path took me past the stables, and I paused. He walked towards me, still snapping the crop.

"You have spoken with my wife?"

"Yes. We talked."

"Have you learned anything?"

"Things, yes. It is necessary to connect them."

"To separate the truth from the absurdities, you mean?"

"No. That is not what I meant."

He looked speculatively at me.

"Then you have nothing to report?"

"Not as yet."

"I see. Well. And where are you going now?"

"A walk. I often walk while I think."

"Will you ride with me, instead?"

"I think not. A solitary stroll is more conducive to contemplation."

"As you wish."

I started to turn away.

"I expect Catherine told you a great deal of nonsense?"

I turned back, without replying.

"I mean to say . . . you cannot take all she says these days at face value."

"I will make the evaluations," I told him.

For a moment I thought he was going to make a sharp rejoinder. Then he shrugged rather elegantly.

"Of course," he said.

I crossed the field on a tangent to the course Catherine had led me over earlier, coming to the trees somewhat to the south of the graveyard. When I was in the shadows and paused and looked back, Fengriffen was watching me. I had the impression that he had watched me all the time it took to traverse the rolling ground. It was hard to be sure, at that distance, but he appeared to be scowling. The groom was behind him, holding the horse patiently. Fengriffen turned away then and swung gracefully into the saddle. The horse took two steps sideways, rearing slightly, and then they were off at the gallop. The groom looked after them, scratching his unruly hair and pushing his cloth cap to the back of his head. He waited until Fengriffen had turned his mount sharply around the side of the house, and then moved into the darkness of the stables.

And I moved into the woods.

The wood, although wild and overgrown, was not large. I anticipated little difficulty in locating the woodsman's dwelling. There were numerous trails, slender paths where the growth had been beaten down by the passage of animals, and I followed the largest of these. Occasionally I looked up through the twisted limbs, judged the position of the sun by the brightness of the clouds and thus attempted

to keep some semblance of direction. The deeper I penetrated into this forest, the thicker the trees became, and the lower limbs caught at my shoulders and hindered my progress considerably. These trees were somewhat protected from the bellowing wind, and were formed more symmetrically than the twisted arbours of the periphery; stood taller as they contested with their neighbours for the favours of the sun. It was a contest for survival, and one which all had not won, for withered dwarfs, lifeless and dry, clung to their neighbours, wrapping tormented roots and boughs tenaciously about the healthy boles, drawn to the flowing sap . . . arboreal mendicants in a kingdom which gave no alms. Several times I was forced to squeeze past these misshapen forms where they leaned over the path, and once a dead limb cracked sharply at a slight pressure from my elbow. It was not difficult to think of this forest as a physical manifestation of twisted mind, and I have trod through mental labyrinths just as I wandered through those trees, seeking the darkest spot in the deepest and most secretive seclusion.

The earth became damper, almost swampy. The mud sucked at my boots, reluctant to release my feet. It became exceedingly unpleasant and, in annoyance, I used my stick to batter at the tenacious creepers and vines; caught myself doing this and chuckled at such unguided rage; paused to light a pipe and allow my nerves to relax. Then I pressed on more slowly through the fuscous forest, and came abruptly upon the cabin.

It was a structure of rough grey stone and splintered wood, badly in need of repair. A thin ribbon of smoke arose from the jagged chimney, coiling straight upwards for a few feet and then, taken by the wind, was torn to shreds. I stared at the hovel for some moments before I became aware of the woodsman. He was seated in front of the door, directly in my line of vision, yet so well was his figure suited to the surroundings that I had failed to notice him until he moved. He raised his head and regarded me. His countenance was terrible to behold. The birthmark—for such the blood-image proved to be—stretched in a wedge of vascular tissue from the corner of his mouth to his temple, and his greasy hair fell in matted twists over his brow. I was repulsed by his appearance, and yet his features were not without intelligence—not the intelligence of civilized man, but the animal wile and suspicion of one who lives alone with nature.

He did not move at my approach, but his mouth opened, the long wolfish jaw dropping to reveal tobacco-stained teeth. Beside him an object which I had taken to be a pile of rags, stirred. It proved to be his dog, a mangy creature of skin and bone, and this brute regarded me in exactly the same manner as his master.



I moved to within a few feet of this bestial pair, and leaned on my stick.

"I wish to have a word with you," I said.

He nodded. The dog moved towards him, slinking, and the placed a gnarled hand on its neck.

"Will you grant me a few moments?"

He blinked. Perhaps he was unaccustomed to a civil approach, or perhaps unused to human relations in any form.

"I've not done nothing," he said.

"I did not imply that you had."

His discoloured fingers moved nervously through the animal's stiff pelt.

"This here be my home," he said. He nodded his head, as though affirming the words to himself. "Ain't no one as can deny me my land. I can't be sent from here." He slowly closed one eye and cocked his head so that the cords stood out in his stringy neck. "It's all written out proper."

"I have no wish to send you away, my good man."

"Did ye come from the manor, then?"

I nodded.

"From Fengriffen?"

I nodded again.

He turned to the dog; made a curious sound deep in his throat, whereupon the brute lifted a ragged ear. The dog's teeth were every bit as foul as the man's.

"I am a doctor," I said.

Something akin to interest sparked in his eyes.

"The mistress will be poorly, then?" he asked.

I ignored the query; said, "I understand that the mistress spoke with you some time ago."

"Oh, aye."

"I would like to know what you spoke of."

He shook his head. His expression was sullen and stubborn, but modified. It was as if he took pleasure from the mood.

"Will you tell me?"

"Nay."

"But why not?"

"Ain't no reason I got to. This here be my home. No reason to less I like."

"But surely there can be no harm in it."

He shook his head again.

I contemplated offering this wretched creature money, but decided against it—felt certain that he could be bribed into speaking but that

what he said would lose all validity if he spoke purely for emolument that he would tell me anything that came into his dubious mind, and take some perverse pleasure in the deceit.

"And yet, you spoke willingly enough to the mistress."

"Not the same. Not the same at all. I had to tell the mistress as I did."

"Had to?"

"Was a duty."

"But you won't tell me?"

"No reason."

I stared at him, trying to trace the meanderings of his thought process; wondered if his refusal was merely a characteristic perversity, or something more motivated.

I said, "The mistress is ill. I believe you may be able to assist in curing her, by revealing what your conversation was concerned with."

He looked incredulous. His odious face registered amazement for an instant, and then pleasure.

"Cure her?" he asked. "Cure her?"

And he laughed.

His laughter was fiendish and inhuman. It seemed impossible that such sound could be formed on living vocal chords; resonated in a human skull. It vibrated and undulated, and then broke off in a fit of coughing which wracked his emaciated form.

He spat upon the ground and peered at this mucoid blob with interest; studied it as some arcane sorcerer seeking knowledge in the entrails of a sacrifice. I shuddered with revulsion. When he looked up again, no trace of amusement marked the passage of his laughter.

Then, without another word, he rose and entered his hovel. The dog crept after him, slinking like a reptile, and the door swung closed on broken hinges. I was left standing alone, my hands clenching on my stick. From within came a repetition of that hideous laughter. Once more it ended with uncontrolled coughing. I was filled with a mad and irrational desire to bring my cudgel violently against the man's gruesome mouth; to still that abominable sound. And what use would that have been? Was I, too, sinking into the strange mood which tormented this estate? Or was my loathing for this creature directed by some instinct deeper than the rational; some fear passed down through the eons of time, which recognized pure evil and cause a physical reaction? Some racial memory, long forgotten in the conscious mind, lying dormant until an hour of need?

I turned and plunged into the forest, too tense for proper consideration . . .

It was not difficult to imagine the effect the woodsman had had on Catherine, both at his sudden appearance in the graveyard and on her visit to his dwelling. Indeed, I found it hard to keep his image from springing into my own mind in all the odious detail, and it had obviously been far more terrible for her, with her mind already stimulated by fear and resting precariously on the balance of sanity. What was more difficult was judging why he had been reluctant to speak to me—had, in fact, displayed all the overt signs of a guilty conscience. Did he, in fact, have some dark secret to conceal, or was his silent suspicion no more than a constant state of mind? I could not decide with any sense of certainty. But one thing, I did decide.

I was determined to know the legend.

In the morning, I asked Fengriffen if I might have the use of a carriage for the day.

"Certainly," he said. "But why, may I ask?"

"I wish to go into the village."

He frowned.

"Wouldn't your time be spent to better advantage here?"

"I have decided it will be advisable to have a word or two with the village doctor."

His frown darkened.

"Old Whittle? I've already informed you that, by his own admission, he is powerless in this matter."

"And yet I think it might prove wise to speak to him. I must gather facts from different points of view before I can sift them together. Whittle may well have noticed symptoms which were meaningless to his frame of reference, but might be of value to me."

Fengriffen nodded, slowly.

"As you wish. Will you require a coachman?"

"I will drive myself."

He nodded.

"I'll arrange for a carriage to be readied," he said. He started to move off, then paused.

"Did your walk yesterday stimulate any theories?" he asked, peering rather sharply at me.

"It's too early to judge."

"You went into the woods, did you not?"

"Yes, in point of fact. I did."

"You didn't encounter anyone there, by any chance?"

Something in his tone set my senses rasping.

"Why do you ask?" I said, carefully and casually.

"Oh, nothing. Some difficulty with a poacher. Nothing of importance."

He turned then, his shoulders high and square.

"It was just an idle thought," he said.

I did not press the point.

I sent my card into Doctor Whittle's office, and he admitted me immediately. He was a man of considerable age and snow-white hair, but a spark of youthful interest remained in his eyes. His office was a pleasant room, tinged with the lingering odours of tobacco and coffee and books—pleasant without pretence to luxury. We shook hands. His grip was firm and he inclined his head in a gesture which was deferential but in no way servile. I liked the man instantly; recognized qualities which would make him worthy no matter what his chosen profession.

"I wish to thank you for your recommendation," I told him. "It is a compliment."

"Ah, on the contrary," he replied. "It is a compliment to myself, to be able to. I have read something of your studies and work . . . all I have been able to, in fact. My regret is that I am too advanced in years to pursue this new science myself."

He offered me a seat and sat opposite, his desk between us and the window behind him. I could see the dull red gables and chimney pots of the village and, in the distance, a few sheep dotted on the hill. A tranquil and pastoral view, seen across the shoulder of a tranquil and practical man, and it struck me as strange that, in such a setting, I had come to seek the clue to a disrupted and tormented mind.

"Yes," he said. "I am fascinated by these new theories and approaches . . . but you have come about Catherine Fengriffen, of course?"

"I have."

He spread his hands.

"I fear I will be unable to help you, Doctor Pope. I treated her to the best of my limited ability, without results. At the first I expected she was in the initial stages of brain fever and recommended the usual treatment, relaxation and fresh air. But it is far deeper than a physical disorder of the brain. The mind, perhaps. But that is not my field."

"And yet, the mind and the body are inextricably connected. Either can affect the other. If I might ask you a few questions, first, concerning the general state of her health?"

"Certainly. But, as far as I can determine, her health . . . her physical state . . . is satisfactory. I have given her a thorough examination and can find no symptoms of any malady known to me. She is listless. She has no interest in life. And, what may be more to the point, she does not appear to desire to regain her interest; seems quite

content to sink into torpor and lethargy. But, although I can recognize these attitudes, I can find no reason for them." He paused, frowning slightly. "I have the impression," he added, "that she does not find her condition a mystery . . . that she believes she knows what has caused this state of Laodicean indifference, and furthermore, believes it chronic and incurable. But that is only my passing impression, Doctor. I could not vouch for it. The acedia is present, but by what reasons I am helpless to discover."

I nodded. This much I had already discerned.

"If you have any specific question?" he asked.

"Not concerning her health, no. I do, however, wish to make a certain inquiry. Perhaps you will know the answer . . . perhaps you will be surprised at the question, as well, but I believe it may have some bearing."

I paused. I was suddenly almost reluctant to take this line of inquiry further; examined my own feelings and found myself disturbed, as if I were moving into a field where I did not belong; intruding where I could do no good. This was a unique and, considering my science, an adverse mood. And yet it persisted, despite my realization—proof of the fact that more than awareness is necessary to subjugate emotion. The good doctor was waiting, obviously curious at my sudden hesitation, and I forced myself to trespass beyond the boundaries of unfounded dominions.

"Are you acquainted with the legend of Fengriffen, Doctor?" I asked. He seemed momentarily startled. His bright eyes blinked, the reaction of wise bird. "The legend concerning the woodsman?" I added.

Doctor Whittle nodded slowly.

"I believe there may be some obscure connection between this legend and her state of mind, you see. That the knowledge has affected her in some manner."

"She knows the tale, then?"

"Yes."

"Charles asked me not to mention it in her presence. Not that I would have, of course. But perhaps he, too, saw that she might be susceptible to it?"

"I believe so. But she has heard it. She is possessed of an imaginative mind. If not superstitious, at least fertile and able to be easily stimulated. In many ways, this fecundity of consciousness is a blessing; in other ways, as in the case in point, it can be a curse. But it may well be of great help to me if I, too, know the legend."

Once more he nodded.

"Well, it is not so much a legend," he said. "It is, in fact, truth.

A terrible tale, but true. I know, Doctor, for I was there. The curse, certainly, is nonsense, but the tale itself is nightmarish. I can fully understand how knowledge of this crime could have affected a young woman; will freely admit that it affected me to a certain extent; caused me to spend many a sleepless night as, despite my efforts to resist it, the gruesome details assumed a place in my mind . . . ”

He paused and withdrew a rosewood snuff box from his waist-coat; offered it to me, tapping the box. I partook of a pinch; over-did it, in fact, and sneezed, but was too engrossed in this conversation to let such an impropriety bother me. He placed the box on the desk and spent some moments squaring it with the corner, as if this regularity were of enormous importance.

“It was long ago,” he said. He moved the box another millimetre. “I was but a young man, in my first year of practice, and perhaps I would not have been so troubled had I been more experienced in the agonies of accident and illness. It is hard to say. I have never spoken of it, you see . . . only speak of it now because I understand the necessity, and because you are a man of science. And yet, through all these years, the interest—is that the word, I wonder? Are terrible things always of lasting interest? The memory, at least, persists in vivid and graphic detail. I recall the sounds and the scents and the colours which, at the time, were carved so deeply into my perception. I recall, too, my own emotions—indefinable, because they were interwoven and mingled, but with something of horror and something of outrage and a great deal of physical nausea. Still, you will want facts, not impressions . . . ”

“Impressions, too, may be valuable. Tell me all you can recall, both of fact and feeling.”

“I recall everything,” he said. The snuff box was lined up perfectly with the corner of the desk, now, and he suddenly tapped it with his forefinger, causing it to spin across the polished surface. It slid towards the edge, and he stopped it under his hand with a startlingly violent motion, as if he were swatting some loathsome insect.

“It is not a pleasant tale,” he said, with an understatement which did not match his expression.

Then he told me the story . . .

“It was in the time of Charles’ grandfather, Henry Fengriffen,” he began. “I was, as I have told you, in my first year of practice, and was called in a professional capacity just after the event. But I had better tell it in chronological order, to avoid confusion and also because, even now, I find it difficult to be objective; to avoid stressing certain aspects out of proper proportion. Since that time I have had a great deal of acquaintance with violence, but this was my first

involvement with the evil of which man is capable and still, I believe, the most gruesome. Like a man's first love, a man's first cognition of evil remains imprinted upon his soul. Thus. It will be necessary to tell you something of Henry Fengriffen first . . . "

"He was a strange man, this Fengriffen, a man of sharply changing moods. Not a brooder, but a man of impetuous action and insufferable arrogance, for the most part . . . a debauched man, I might say. And yet there was this acute definition in his attitudes; that is, he would commit some base act and, moments afterwards, suffer enormous regrets and do his best to undo the damage he had done. Of course, that was not always possible. He did not seem to realize this; seemed to believe that a gift of money was all that was required to atone for debased and wicked actions. Despite his regrets, he found it constitutionally impossible to offer apology. Perhaps he never saw the faintest possibility of lowering himself in such a manner and truly believed that money purchased absolution and respect; more likely he did not condescend to desire respect, but merely wished to absolve himself in his own mind. Oh, he possessed virtues, as well. He was extremely generous and absolutely loyal to those he had befriended; was truly admired and esteemed by all whom he had not injured. And, in justice to the man, I must say that it was far easier to be debauched in those days. Henry dearly loved to play the squire, galloping madly through the fields of his tenants and drinking heavily with his companions; journeying to the cities and seaports to wench and game and carouse with a savage abandon. I cannot imagine the depths of depravity to which he sank on these bouts of libation, nor do I care to. I know he often fell in with the foulest sort of fellow, the scum of the docks, professional pugilists, purveyors of women and chronic tosspots—God knows what else. Perhaps he absorbed the wickedness from these wretched creatures; perhaps his own inclinations were magnified by their presence; perhaps he was helplessly drawn to them by the gravity of evil. I do not know if I say this in excuse for the man, or merely because it is how I remember him. And yet I also remember that he gave lavishly to the poor, that he arranged, many times, to supply me with medicines and to pay my fees for treating the unfortunate; that he financed the renovation of the church, although he was a professed atheist; that, although I was appalled at his way of life, I could not help but recognize his charm. Not an easy man to judge harshly—a man, in fact, whom I would have thought inherently good, beneath his vulgar exterior, had it not been for the affair of which I am speaking . . . "

"Now, Fengriffen had, at that time, a young gamekeeper living in a cabin in the woods. Silas, his name was. He was a local lad and

I had often seen him in the village. He seemed a pleasant youth, well set up and rather handsome; lean and powerful and attractive, despite his crude leather clothing and cloth cap, and a large and unsightly birthmark on his cheek. Not intelligent, of course . . . surely not educated . . . but none the less a fine example of sinewy health and unspoiled nature. The young girls of his class were all attracted to him; would greet him with blushes and lowered eyes as he strode down the street. He could, I suppose, have taken his choice of any of them, and eventually, when he was perhaps twenty-five years of age, he took a bride from the village. Her name was Sarah. She was barely seventeen, a virgin of unblemished beauty, and it was first love for both of them. They were married in the village and, on the wedding night, Silas brought his bride back to his rustic cabin, thinking it proper to consummate the marriage in the place where they would undoubtedly have lived the rest of their natural lives in concord and happiness. Would have, I say, for this is where the foul deed occurred . . . ”

Doctor Whitale had begun to toy with the snuff box again, staring down at it intently, as though the rosewood were a crystal, revealing the past.

“Henry Fengriffen heard of the wedding, and of the bride’s virginal qualities. Normally, that would have meant no more than a crude conversation or coarse joke with his cronies, but fate played a cruel hand at this point. For he was riotously drunk, at the tail end of a three day binge, and alcohol had destroyed what judgement he possessed . . . left a vacuum to be filled by lust. He decided to view the bride; decided it was his feudal right, perhaps. His cronies were in accord, as usual, always willing to make sport. And so they mounted at the house and thundered off across the fields and into the woods, ignoring the dangers of galloping through the trees and setting the forest vibrating with their foul-mouthed shouts and raucous laughter. It seems incredible that they did not suffer at least one injury on that mad gallop—an injury which might well have proved a blessing, by preventing a far worse event. But the devil guided their horses, and they arrived at the cabin. I firmly believe that, at this point, no harm was intended; that it was no more than a drunken jest. Who knows? At any rate, they dismounted and came to the door just as the couple were bedding. Fengriffen beat loudly upon the entrance, shouting demands for entry, and at length Silas opened the door and peered out suspiciously.”

“I have come to view the bride,” Fengriffen roared.

“She is abed, Master,” Silas said.

“All the better then, my man,” said Fengriffen, and he pushed



the gamekeeper roughly aside and strode into the cabin. His cohorts trailed in behind him, amidst laughter and gaiety. Several had brought bottles of wine, which they passed around, drinking from the neck and spilling the liquid down their chins and chests. You may imagine the feelings that overwhelmed poor Silas at this intrusion. His bride pulled the coarse covers up to her throat, staring in wide-eyed dismay, and her fright added to Fengriffen's pleasure. He was well acquainted with women of easy virtue, of course, but virgins were not so well known to him.'

"He grasped the covers and pulled them roughly away, leaving the pitiful woman naked and cringing upon the cot, while Silas looked on in helpless rage and frustration. Fengriffen's companions all crowded around, joking and drinking and slapping each other on the backs. Silas was trembling violently. His eyes rolled about madly, his fists clenched and his teeth sank into his lower lip."

'Some wit said, "Been many the year since old Fengriffen has sighted a virgin, eh lads?" and they all thought this enormously humorous. They roared with laughter, and Fengriffen determined to have his own jest.'

'He turned to Silas and asked, "Have you taken her yet?"'

"No, Master."

"Then I claim my right to break her!"'

"No!" Silas shouted, advancing.'

"Their eyes locked. Fengriffen swore, afterwards, that up to that very instant he had no intention of actually committing this act; that until then it had been no more than an amusement. I believe him in this. But he was a strange man. The moment his servant denied him the right, he felt an overpowering compulsion to take it. They stared at one another, their wills locked along the visual path. Neither would yield. The others became silent, fascinated now. If Silas had been a weak man . . . but he wasn't. A servant, but a man in his own right, and he placed himself between Fengriffen and the bed, his powerful arms folded across his chest . . ."

"Possibly, even then, Fengriffen would have heeded words of reason; could have yielded to pleading. But Silas had no words of persuasion; could not have spoken in such terms to his master. Fengriffen stepped forward, and Silas acted in the only way known to him - acted as a threatened animal."

"He seized Fengriffen by the shoulders and threw him violently to the floor. His eyes were blazing, his broad chest heaved with hatred and he drooled from the mouth. He stood over Fengriffen in a threatening manner, and Fengriffen shouted for assistance, suddenly terrified by his servant's black rage, and thrown into a fury by the

attack. His companions hesitated for an instant, stunned by the scene, and then they obeyed Fengriffen's command and seized Silas."

"Silas struggled with preternatural strength, knocking several to the floor. I treated their wounds, I know the unbelievable extent of the damage he inflicted upon them. But they were too many, and in the end he was subdued and held securely . . ."

"Held, Doctor, and forced to watch, while Henry Fengriffen raped his virgin bride . . ."

Whittle paused.

"Not a pretty tale," I said.

He looked at me rather sadly.

"There is worse to come," he said.

"When Fengriffen had had his way with her, he stepped back from the bed and bowed sardonically to his disobedient servant; with a gesture he offered the ruined bride to her husband. He was satisfied that he had justly punished the man's insubordination. Silas was still held by the others; had ceased to struggle while Fengriffen abused his bride, but now he fought again, foaming at the mouth and uttering bestial snarls. Sarah was hysterical, sobbing and moaning, scarcely able to breathe. Her eyes rolled. And then she saw the axe which leaned against the wall, close by the bed. It was a heavy-headed tool which Silas used not only to chop wood, but to dispatch animals caught in his traps, and there was a dark stain of dried blood on the metal. She stared at this for a moment, until the import registered, and then she seized it quite suddenly and dragged it to the bed. She had not the strength left to lift it, but dragged it across the floor and then up onto the cot. Before anyone, except Silas, had ascertained her purpose, she drew the edge across her throat; held the head in both hands and worked it back and forth like a blunt saw. The poor woman could not face life after her debasement. Not with sanity."

"The men released their grip on Silas at this, not thinking of the consequences, for they were taken aback by this action they had not bargained on; had still, for all the flagitiousness of their deed, regarded it as no more than a humorous episode to be retold, amidst ribald laughter, at the fireside, just as they might have recalled dallying with a woman of the streets in carnal frolic or, perhaps more to the point, remembered some particularly violent end to a hunt. They did not actually think of a game-keeper or his wife as human beings, you see."

"Silas tore free of their loosened grasp and fell to his knees beside the bed. No one sought to restrain him now. Sarah was babbling incoherently as Silas gently withdrew the axe from her hands. The wound was not fatal. She hadn't the strength to press deeply enough

to sever the jugular vein. But the flesh was broken and torn in a jagged line and blood streamed down her naked body in rivulets which mingled with the previous blood of her ruination."

"Silas stared at her for an instant, moaning deep within his breast—moaning in his very heart, which ceased to beat for that instant, and then commenced again, drumming the burden of torment through his arteries. He sprang up, his blood pounding, and spun around; swung the axe in a wide and vicious arc at Fengriffen's head. Fengriffen raised his arm to ward off the blow and the edge caught him a glancing cut across the shoulder. He fell against the wall and Silas stepped after him, raising the weapon to dash his brains asunder. But, once again, he was seized by Fengriffen's cohorts; once again he struggled with berserk rage, only to succumb to the weight of numbers; struggled with even greater vigour, so that they were forced to land several heavy blows to his head before he could be subdued."

"Fengriffen arose, holding his shoulder. He was insane with anger. His arrogant pride could not encompass an attack of this nature, and he was aroused far beyond the bounds of convention; no matter his guilt, he could not tolerate equality. Silas, although semi-conscious, still retained a firm grip upon the axe handle with his right hand, and in that instant Fengriffen saw what form his revenge must take."

"He commanded his companions to drag Silas outside. They did so, as he kicked and bucked spasmodically between them. His head hung down, he was dazed, but still he would not yield. Fengriffen followed, directing them to force his gamekeeper to the woodpile which stood beside the cabin. There was a chopping block beside the wood, and Fengriffen pointed to it with a quivering finger. His friends hesitated at this, not realizing his intentions and wanting no part of murder, but Fengriffen ranted and howled with such fierce domination that eventually they obeyed. They bent Silas to his knees before the chopping block."

"Fengriffen sent one of his men to the well for a bucket of cold water, while he took off his coat and rolled up his sleeves. He was sweating, his eyes were inflamed, blood ran from the gash in his shoulder. But he ignored the pain. His rage at being wounded far outweighed the pain of the wound. The man returned with a bucket, and Fengriffen seized it and placed it beside the chopping block."

"Then he gave a further command. When his companions saw he intended less than murder, they were no longer reluctant, for they were men of his temperament and inclination, and understood intolerance. Two of them grasped Silas' right arm and forced it upon the block. The wiry hand writhed like a pale squid in the moonlight."

"You have raised your hand against your master twice in this

night!" roared Fengriffen. "It shall not happen again!"

He took up the axe and positioned himself to the side of the chopping block.

"Will you beg mercy?" he demanded.

"Silas turned his head to the side; looked up at Fengriffen with one eye, in profile, and spat out a foul oath."

"Then take justice!" Fengriffen said, between his teeth, and he swung the axe over and down.

"The edge dropped across Silas' hand at the knuckles and buried itself into the wood with a dull clunk. The severed fingers flew up like splinters, spinning in the air. The index finger curled up like a woodchip, striking Silas in the face. Four separate streams of blood spewed across the chopping block. Silas' body leaped convulsively, but he made no sound. His eye was still turned upon Fengriffen. Fengriffen stepped back and nodded, and his men thrust the dismembered hand into the bucket of icy water. Then they all moved away."

"Silas knelt there, his head resting on the block now and his right arm in the bucket. The cold liquid numbed the bloody stumps and kept the fire from rushing up his arm. He did not move; did not dare withdraw his hand from the icy anaesthetic. The gentlemen stood around him, silent. They were abruptly stricken by the awareness of their fiendish crime. Fengriffen was pale and perspiring as he slid his coat back on. Suddenly they all wished nothing more than to flee from that terrible scene."

"They moved, still in silence, to where their horses were tied; unfastened them and began to mount. And then Silas moved. They all paused. Fengriffen had one foot in the stirrup and halted, frozen in place. Looking back over his shoulder, he saw Silas' left hand begin to grope like some sightless animal over the ground; watched as, one by one, Silas found his severed fingers, and gathered them into his hand. And then he wrapped his left forearm around the bucket, cradling it to his chest and, his right hand still immersed, stood up. He raised his face to Fengriffen. The moonlight struck full upon his countenance, as he drew his amputated limb from the merciful water and pointed the gory stump, a blunt and solitary finger of accusation, at Fengriffen."

"The cold had stopped the rush of blood, but sluggish drops crept down his forearm and dropped heavily to the earth. The agony, as air replaced liquid on the open wound, must have been almighty, and yet no pain showed in that bleached face . . ."

"And he mouthed the curse . . ."

"A curse that has fathered legend; a curse which must have come

from his soul, for that rustic tongue knew no words of anathema. His arm extended, he made his vow; swore that the monstrous spirit evoked in the blood of this night would know no rest until it had known vengeance, and that the next virgin bride of Fengriffen House would taste the horror of violation."

"His voice held them in unbreakable bonds of frozen steel. No one moved. Even the horses stood still as statues, showing wide white eyes. At last, Silas pressed the gruesome remains of his hand back into the bucket and, turning, staggered to the cabin. The blood which had run down his arm left a trail in his wake. The moonlight plunged darkly into these drops of blood, and dark terror plunged into Fengriffen's heart . . ."

"Well, as I say, Fengriffen was a man whose moods changed quickly, and the curse had acted as a catalyst upon his emotions. He became instantly sober and overflowing with remorse. Despite his wound, he galloped all the way to the village to summon me; burst into my rooms, demanding haste. I wished to treat his shoulder first, for it was a rather nasty gash, and I did not at that point understand what had occurred in the woods. But he would not allow treatment; cursed me most foully for suggesting it and, between his verbal abuse, told me in fragmented phrases what had transpired . . . phrases which were all the more vivid for being disjointed. Later I was to hear the tale in a restrained manner, and be able to piece together all the details, but at the time I received impressions rather than facts; impressions which came from his tone of voice as much as his words; from his wild eyes as much as from his broken speech. And you can imagine what those impressions were like."

"Fengriffen rode back with me. We lathered our horses and sent stones clattering beneath their hooves in a mad dash such as I have never made before or since. He had inspired me with his own sense of speed . . . the sort of man who is capable of transmitting such emotions and desires to another. But when he had led me to the cabin, he would go no farther; could not face his crime again. He turned back and I went on through the last few trees and into the clearing. The first thing I saw was the chopping block, with the axe still buried in the surface. I turned my eyes away from this, dismounted, and entered the house."

"Silas was kneeling beside the bed. The bucket was on the floor beside him and his hand was in the water. His left arm cradled his bride. As I approached he turned his head, as on a swivel, to look at me. God knows how or why he had retained consciousness, but he had. He recognized me; seemed perfectly aware of his surroundings, rational and coherent. He had lost a great amount of blood,

and the bucket was filled with shredding ribbons of congealed grume, but the water had preserved his life. Better it had not."

"Silas refused to let me attend his hand until I had seen to Sarah's superficial wound; gnashed his teeth at me like a cornered beast when I hesitated. She was babbling and her eyes were clouded. The flesh was torn at her throat, but it was not serious—not that torn flesh. There was a far deeper wound beyond her throat, for her mind was gone. In those moments of agony and terror she had been reduced to a mad-woman. Silas continued to hold her to his breast as I treated her injury. His fist was clenched against her shoulder. As I tilted her chin back, she slipped slightly in his arm, and as he caught at her, his hand opened."

"And his fingers fell out."

"All four severed fingers dropped into Sarah's lap, and we all looked down at them. If there had been any hope of restoring her sanity, it fled at that instant. She emitted an inhuman howl, a sound which no human should have made. Not the sound of human emotion, but a meaningless cry, the automatic response of a mind from which comprehension had ebbed. It is a sound which still vibrates in my ears, on nights of solitary silence . . . vibrates from within, where it is stored, woven into the fabric of my mind . . ."

Doctor Whittle stood up and walked to the window; stood looking out, his hands clasped behind his back and beneath his coattails. He seemed to have aged, but perhaps that was because I could no longer see the bright intelligence of his eyes. I assumed that his tale was finished, and was about to speak when he turned back to me.

"Well," he said. "The rest is anticlimax. Silas lived. Sarah lived. Henry Fengriffen's regret knew no bounds. He wished to make restitution, but Silas would accept nothing; refused money and food and wine, all the material possessions with which Fengriffen settled his debts. This drove frustration through Fengriffen; a spit of helplessness on which he revolved over the fire of guilt. He became desperate to atone for his crime—in his own eyes, of course. But when he sent wine, it was poured into the ground; when he sent food, it was left to the wild animals or to decay; when he sent money, it was scattered among the trees. For Silas believed that retribution would come in a different manner."

"He continued to live in the cabin, tearing a meagre existence from the woods and nursing his wife. She had become, from a beautiful and healthy young bride, a thing of horror with scarred throat, a hag in rags, frothing at the mouth and wild of eye, thin as a skeleton, with long talons and filthy habits. An odious mockery of woman. Several times she ran away, or perhaps wandered off, and Silas was forced

to search for her on the moors and bring her back by force."

"And still he loved her."

"He seemed to realize that her insanity had no bearing on justice, and continued to cohabit with her as a husband. Eventually, years after, I was astounded to hear that she had given birth to a son. I ventured to the cabin, more, I must confess, through curiosity than duty. The child was a robust enough lad, but marred by the hereditary birthmark which Silas possessed—larger than Silas' and more hideous, like a web of blood. Sarah had become the most wretched creature imaginable, scarcely human . . . a grotesque caricature of a madonna, clutching the squalling infant to her sunken torso. Silas, too, seemed to have become somewhat deranged; was far more incoherent than his rough accent warranted. But, with great effort, I came to understand that he had, at last, accepted a gift from Fengriffen. For Henry had never desisted in his efforts, and upon hearing of the child's birth he saw his opportunity to present a gift which Silas could neither return nor refuse. He had never assumed that Silas would have children, quite naturally, because of Sarah's condition. Now that it was an accomplished fact, he made a small alteration in his will—small enough, you will think—to the effect that Silas and his descendants were granted the eternal right to reside in the woodlands of the Fengriffen estates. He had probably expected Silas to refuse this right, in theory, while remaining there in fact, since there was nowhere else for him to go, and that the true value of his recompense would go, in time, to the child. However, such was not the case. Silas seemed inordinately pleased with the rights granted to his child. At first I took this as a sign that his hatred had lessened over the years or else that he had let the past slop in his senile brain until the importance diminished, for he had refused gifts of far greater value. Such, however, was not the case."

"While he was telling me of this, he took the child upon his lap, and let it make a plaything of the gnarled stump of his hand. The child began to laugh with glee as its tiny fingers explored the grottos and crevices of that gruesome toy, and Silas' eyes lighted with fatherly pride— and with something more—upon his offspring."

"He was pleased, you see, because he knew his son would be able to remain there, and to witness the revenge. And so, it would appear, he has . . ."

Doctor Whittle raised his eyebrows.

"Silas' child, then, is the woodsman who dwells there now?"

"He is. Both Sarah and Silas lived well into old age; lived long past self-sufficiency, and depended on the child to feed them, while all the time, over all those years, Silas instilled the rotten seeds of

hatred into the boy, warping his mind until he knew only visions of vengeance. They died, within a few weeks of one another, some few years past now. But the son has remained."

"This explains a great deal, Doctor," I told him.

"Will it be of value?"

"I hope so. It is obviously the root of the damage, and must be ploughed from her mind."

I stood up, extending my hand.

"You were most kind to afford me so much of your time," I said.

"Perhaps we shall meet again."

"If you are staying at the house," he said.

"Ah, of course. You will deliver the child . . ."

"Yes, As I have most children in the village during these long years."

"When is the child due?"

"Oh, quite soon. Within the week, perhaps."

I nodded thoughtfully. Whittle was a man in whom one could place the utmost confidence, and I said, "I have an idea that the birth may well prove a turning point—that the cares of motherhood and child love may bring her mind back from the dark course it has taken. It will leave her less time to brood. We are men of science, Doctor. We do not countenance the power of the supernatural. But Catherine Fengriffen is a woman, and by believing in the curse, she has given that curse a power to affect her . . . has invested power in a non-existent concept, you see."

"Then let us pray that the new interests of motherhood will dull that power," Whittle said.

"Yes," I said, but I had long since subjugated prayer to insight. Still, one hopes.

I drove slowly back from the village, pondering upon Henry Fengriffen's crime in relation to Catherine; trying to super-impose my mind upon hers and understand what the full effect had been when, in those distasteful surroundings, she had heard the tale from the child of Silas and Sarah—the child who had been sired and reared with but one purpose in mind; guided toward one goal; instructed only in the one dual emotion—hatred and revenge. Even Doctor Whittle, who had not been involved directly, had found it impossible to be objective while recalling the events of that terrible night. How much more frightful had the telling been as the words fell from the woodsman's lips; as Catherine looked into those brutish features, and watched the twitchings of that mobile birthmark which ran from his lips? And yet, realizing how disturbed and troubled she must have been, had the



tale been enough, in itself, to force her to her present condition? Was she irrational enough to blame her husband for the sins of his forebear? Or was there something more, something that Doctor Whittle did not know? It seemed likely. Catherine did not have the symptoms of one whose mind had snapped under stress and emotion, she was still aware of the proper proportion of her life, and even if she believed the curse and lived in constant terror, awaiting God knows what frightful vengeance, that alone would not account for her negative reaction; might have caused a positive state of nervous fear, but not her decline into resigned indifference. I was baffled by this paradox, and felt certain that some essential fact had eluded me, or been deliberately kept from me. My first task, then, was to discover the truth.

I left the carriage at the stables. The stable lad was looking up at the dark clouds, his young face creased prematurely with his frown.

"Will it rain in the night?" I asked.

"Well, I've never known it to hold off so long once that the clouds are black as this," he said, waving his greasy cap at the ominous heavens. "It's right peculiar. Old Jacob says t'won't come down 'til 'morrow, though. Never know old Jacob be wrong nor neither. Right peculiar. Makes a fellow wonder what's a' waitin' fer."

I smiled at this personification of the impending storm. The lad jammed his cap back on, pulling it well down so that a few strands of matted hair stuck out at right angles from beneath the band. He began to unfasten the harness with the deft motions of experience, still glancing upwards, suspicious of those looming clouds.

"Don't much fancy weather o' this sort, neither," he said. "With the sky low and the air all heavy and wet, like. Sort o' the same as bein' in a cell an' not havin' air to breathe proper. Ain't right, somehow. Makes the 'orses fussy, an' all. Whilst they's bein' groomed ye can feel 'em all shaky under yer 'ands, and all the night ye can hear 'em a-pawin' at the ground, an' snortin' like pigs. 'Orses got plenty o'sense, mostly. Ain't very long on wits, 'orses, but they 'as plenty o' cunning'. They can tell when t' weather ain't as it oughts to be."

He started to say something more, then clamped his mouth shut and shrugged, rather embarrassed at having spoken at such length or, perhaps, at having voiced an opinion. He grinned foolishly and turned away.

I walked on to the house.

Catherine did not dine with us that evening. She was staying in bed as her time drew near. Neither Fengriffen nor I had much appetite

and the meal was quick and quiet. We adjourned to the library and, after coffee had been brought in and Jacob had departed, I told Fengriffen that I knew of the curse.

His eyes were sardonic as he depreciated my statement with a quick gesture of intolerance. This annoyed me, and I gestured in turn, causing his aristocratic eyebrows to life in surprise.

"What is a curse?" he said. He leaned towards me, his brow furrowed in chevrons of irritation. "Words, no more. Superstition. Balderdash. I did not summon a priest to exorcise my home, I summoned a doctor."

"It is a doctor to whom you speak, sir."

"But, in all truth . . ."

"It is not a matter of truth, but of belief. If your wife believes in this curse, what does truth matter? The mind is capable of conjuring its own truths."

"You mystify me, Doctor."

"Ah, but it is you who have added to the mystery. You have not revealed all that you know. Perhaps you have told me all you deem relevant, but you are wrong in your selections. You knew that your wife visited the woodsman?"

His frown shifted cross-wise, corrugating his forehead, and his face darkened.

"I know that she compromised herself by going, alone, to his hovel, yes. That is the wrong of it, not some absurd vow of revenge."

"You judge her harshly."

"But with justice!"

"Ah yes. The Fengriffen justice. The justice your grandfather inflicted upon his gamekeeper?"

His eye glowed, and for a moment I thought he was about to strike me. His hands clenched on the arms of the chair and his frame tensed and trembled. I leaned towards him, ready for what action he might take. My anger, at that moment, was as great as his. We were both on the edges of our seats, our faces close together and our eyes fighting a skirmish over the intervening distance. In his countenance I saw the inherited attitudes of his grandfather; saw the descendant of that unjust man struggle in the grip of his heredity. And then he relaxed. He slumped back in his chair, his face averted and turned slightly from me. He became absolutely still. He might have been asleep, from his posture, but I knew that he was waiting for me to speak; waiting for whatever hope or insight I might give him. He was a man born to violent emotions, but he had managed to subdue them, and my own anger faded.

I spoke softly.

"My science is in its infancy. Less. No more than a mote in the field of knowledge. I have never claimed to understand the workings of the mind, but I have often looked upon the symptoms and, believe me, they can be awesome. Someday, when the spark which has fertilized this unborn science, has caused it to emerge and mature—someday, in the distant future, it may be possible to trace the functions of thought through the convolutions of the brain and up the articulation of the spinal cord. But, as yet, we are less than mice in a maze, and the mind is the greatest of all mazes. And, sir, if we do grope our blind way through the labyrinth, who knows what mental minotaur may lurk at the centre? I am no Theseus. I have no ball of twine to guide me, and make no false claims. I may only treat the symptoms from the entrance to these devious corridors. If that is not enough . . ."

"It is enough," he whispered.

"Then, believe me. Your wife's illness is connected with the curse."

"Damn the woodsman!" he said. But there was no anger in the condemnation. He was quite calm now, his face the colour of ash. "Can he really be responsible for my wife's behaviour? Can she have truly heeded that creature's word?"

"Responsible? Only in so far as he revealed the past, and certainly she believed him, for it was true. The responsibility must lie with your grandfather's actions, and your wife's willingness to assume beyond the facts."

"I cannot understand these things," Fengriffen said. "It seems we are discussing some form of black magic, some dark art of a former age." He did not speak sarcastically now, but with genuine bewilderment.

"You are confusing a science we do not fully comprehend, with vague notions of sorcery or witchcraft. You deny the curse—and rightly so, for yourself. But you cannot deny the effect it has had upon your wife. And to cure her, we must deal with this curse; seek to disprove it; demonstrate the error of her thinking and show her the truth which is obvious to us."

Fengriffen nodded slowly.

"Perhaps we may begin now," I said. "Tell me—your father. Did he, too, deny the curse?"

"Certainly. If he ever so much as thought of it. We are not a family of idiots."

"And your mother?"

"Of course."

"Tell me something of your mother."

"But what possible bearing can this have?"

"I cannot profess to know, unless you tell me."

"This is absurd. I do not know what miracle I had hoped you to perform, Doctor . . . and do not understand what curious methods you studied in Leipzig, but--"

"First and foremost, I learned that, without confidence, I am powerless."

"I must continue to place faith in you, I expect. My last forelorn hopes, eh? Well, what of my mother?"

"Who was she?"

"A noble lady of great distinction," he said, with some degree of pride. "Slightly older than my father. I told you she passed away while I was but a child, and I cannot remember much about her; cannot differentiate between what I recall and what I was subsequently told. She was a widow . . ."

"A widow?"

"Yes. The widow of my father's greatest friend. There had long been mutual admiration between them, apparently, and after her period of mourning--during which my father aided her greatly in the handling of her affairs--it was quite natural that this respect and affection blossomed into love. Not the romance of youth, you understand, but the deep bonds of mature feeling. And thus . . ."

"And thus," I interrupted, "when your mother first came to Fengriffen House, she did not come as a virgin bride."

Fengriffen blinked.

"Of course not. A widow . . ."

And he paused, regarding me with a strange expression. Yes, Charles knew the form the curse had taken. This was not the way to disprove it, and for some time we were silent.

Jacob knocked and entered; cleared the coffee cups away and asked if we required anything further. Fengriffen dismissed him with a wave of the hand and he left, limping more noticeably than before. The time of storm was approaching, to the discomfort of his old bones.

"Well?" Fengriffen asked.

"Shall we try a different approach?"

"As you like."

"When was it that your wife destroyed the portrait of Henry Fengriffen?"

He did not appear surprised at the question.

"Has she admitted that to you?"

"It was obvious."

"Yes, I expect it was. It is difficult to tell a stranger, even a doctor, of such things. I should have, of course, for it was a milestone in her decline."

"It was some months ago, at the time her behaviour became noticeably worse." He paused for a moment. "It was, in fact, the very day when Doctor Whittle informed us that she was with child. He told us *both together, smiling at the opportunity to bring us such good news*. I was delighted, of course. I turned to my wife. Catherine had become pale, disturbed, visibly shaken. Her reaction was inconceivable, for we had discussed the possibility of children and she had been as desirous as I. I was dumb-founded; reached out to take her hand, whereupon she rose and left the room without a word. It was extremely embarrassing. Poor old Whittle looked absolutely confused. He had come as a messenger of joyful revelation, and been treated as a harbinger of gloom. I smoothed it over as best I could, making some feeble excuse for her. Of course, that was before her state of mind had changed so greatly that I confided in him. He accepted my excuses graciously, and departed. I went to Catherine's room. The door was barred, there was no sound within. I did not knock, but retired to my own room, and to bed. But I could not sleep, I pondered her reactions and the hours passed tediously as I gravitated between annoyance and concern.

"I was still awake, although drowsy, when I heard Catherine pass in the hall. I recognized her step. In those early days of our marriage, I recognized everything connected with my beloved. I thought she was coming to my room, and waited hopefully. But the steps passed; moved on down the hallway. I rose and went to the door, thinking perhaps she was walking in her sleep. As I looked out, I heard a low exclamation, a wordless utterance, and saw that she had paused in the gallery. I was transfixed. She stood there, a wild thing in her flowing nightgown, staring at the portrait and, as I watched, she suddenly slashed at the picture with a letter opener she kept in her room. Again and again she slashed at the canvas with quick, desperate strokes, muttering and groaning as she tore it apart.

"I did not attempt to stop her, for I was too stunned to move. When the task of destruction was ended, and the ruined canvas hung down in ragged shreds, Catherine stepped back; gathered her gown around her, as though taken by a chill. Her bosom heaved, she drew her head back. Suddenly she seemed to become aware of the letter opener, and threw it violently from her hand, as if it were unclean . . . as if it had become soiled by contact with the portrait.

"She came back down the hallway; saw me, suddenly, as she drew near, but passed without a word. Her face was twisted with malice, with hatred . . . with God knows what. It was not the face of the woman I loved."

Fengriffen shuddered.

"God, it was dreadful," he said.

"And did you not connect this destruction with the curse?"

"I connected it with madness," he whispered, and lowered his head.

And then, simultaneously, we became aware of Catherine's presence at the doorway . . .

Fengriffen's head snapped up from his chest, alarmed at her presence and at his own previous statement. Catherine was very pale, swaying on unsteady legs, and yet her expression was collected and calm. She looked at her husband, and then she looked at me, and a grimace vaguely akin to a smile caused her lips to rise at the corners. It was a terrible twisting of the mouth, unrelated to the placid expression in her eyes, the grotesquely deformed offspring of laughter and the ancestor of the rictus of rigor mortis. I could not face that play of feature, and looked away.

Fengriffen sprang to his feet.

"Cathy! You should not be here!"

"Oh? And where should I be?"

Fengriffen advanced towards her; took two strides and then faltered, as if at some invisible barrier; stopped and stared helplessly across the intervening space where unknown emotion has erected a frontier; where the border guards of their disturbed relationship refused to let him pass. His shoulders quivered. Catherine looked beyond him, and caught my eyes again.

"So you have heard the curse," she said.

I nodded.

"And scoffed at such nonsense?"

I shook my head slowly.

"Few things are nonsense," I said. "Nothing voiced in the agony of a broken heart can be nonsense . . ."

"There you are wrong," she said. "Is he not wrong, Charles? Accusation can be nonsense."

And she gestured, as though it were unimportant.

Fengriffen turned to look at me, seeking an ally. I did not know what to say; what I could possibly say in the presence of both of them together. His eyes slid back towards his wife, but she was still looking at me.

"And you are wrong, also, about the curse," she said. "You have not understood the meaning; have looked beyond the obvious and found something less foreign to you: understanding; less difficult to countenance in your learned system of validity. No, Doctor. The curse is not driving me insane, any more than the crime was insanity. Do you not see that? The poor woman went mad as a result of the crime,

just as I fear I will go mad as a result of the revenge. But that is an after-effect, no more. The vengeance chooses a far more terrible form than mere madness . . . ”

And, in truth, I saw nothing of madness in her appearance at that moment; heard nothing of insanity in the voice which delivered the abstruse message. I wished her to continue, for I sensed she was about to reveal what she took for truth. But her face clouded then, and she turned, biting her lip, and rushed from the room. Her motion broke the spell which had held him, and Fengriffen moved after her, shouting for Mrs Lune. That good woman appeared, scurrying down the hallway and intercepting Catherine at the foot of the staircase. Mrs Lune was as pale as Catherine as she took her arm. Catherine leaned heavily against her and Lune assisted her up the stairs, whispering words meant to be soothing, but losing the calming effect in the troubled tone.

Fengriffen stood at the foot of the staircase, his arms swinging about as though he struggled against bondage; gazed up at the departing forms until they had vanished, and then turned to me.

“What can she mean?” he asked.

I did not reply, for I did not know. But there was something else which I desired to know; which I needed to know. I took his arm and led him back into the library. He kept shaking his head from side to side, dazed or puzzled; continued to do so even after he had resumed his seat. I stood before him, waiting to engage his eyes, but he refused to look at me. His head still rotated, heavy-lidded, swinging across and below my line of vision. I placed my fist against my hip, pushing my coat back. There are little tricks of convenience which one learns. I drew my watch from my waistcoat and glanced at it, then let it dangle on the chain. His eyes fastened upon this pendulum as the gold gathered the firelight, and his head stopped moving.

“You have not told me all,” I said “Still you persist in denying me the facts.”

“I have, sir,” he said. “I have told you everything that can be of importance.”

“You have, at some degree of inconvenience to myself, and considerable expense, brought me from London . . . ”

“Expense means nothing to me!” he snapped.

“Nor to me.”

“If you would prefer payment in advance, I shall be glad to issue a cheque at this very moment . . . ”

“You miss the point, sir. Money is little, and does not much concern me. But I cannot approve of waste, and you are wasting my time and hindering what little abilities I may have brought here with me.”

The watch revolved. His eyes were fastened upon it, pinned to the darting shafts of reflection like butterflies on a mat. His eyebrows moved like wings, but his eyes were secured, looking into that little golden world; gazing into a dimension in which his suffering had no reality. In that moment, he would have willingly plunged bodily into this minute world of shifting brilliance, where his mind had already fled; where his consciousness rode smoothly down the bands of light and slipped off, painlessly, into the mellow-shadows. I caused the watch to swing further and faster, and he frowned in visual pursuit, disturbed at this changing pattern; troubled as the spinning dimension changed to the lateral.

And then I clapped my hand over the watch.

Fengriffen blinked back to reality.

I slipped the watch into my waistcoat again. I had no desire to mesmerize the man; had brought him to the borderline and snapped him abruptly back, and it had served the purpose. He looked into my face now. All traces of aristocracy had vanished from his features. He ground his teeth and his eyes rolled, but he was aware of his own existence.

"You have omitted at least one point of importance," I said. "Through guilt, or pride, you have been silent. Your wife spoke of accusation. You have accused her of something, is it not so? Something which you have kept from me? Something relating to her behaviour?"

Fengriffen nodded.

Now we would have truth.

"Yes," he whispered. "Yes, I omitted one thing. I omitted it from my thoughts, as well, you see . . . from my voluntary thoughts. I can not keep it from my dreams, nor keep it from stealing suddenly into my mind when control is relaxed—stealing like some vicious footpad from the dark alley where it hides, to strike a savage wound, again and again, opening the old scar tissue with another dreadful gash. Injuries to the body. Doctor, are simple things. They are mortal, or they heal. Not so these scars on the soul. They, too, can be mortal, but they do not kill. They, too, can heal, but the scar tissue is weak and can be opened again at the slightest touch of memory; opened as painfully each time, these gory wounds which do not bleed, these violent blows which do not bring unconsciousness, these lethal strokes which send a poisoned spear deep into the heart and fester without death. Yes, Doctor. I omitted it . . ."

He stood up; brushed past me and moved to the chimneypiece, where he poured a large tumbler of brandy with shaking hand. The decanter clattered against the rim of his glass and a few drops spilled, unheeded, on to the carpet. He raised the glass to his lips with a sud-



den movement, as though he would drain it at one gulp. But he took a small sip only, the glass rattling on his teeth, before turning towards me.

"You are right," he said. "Perhaps the solution lies in this omission. Perhaps a doctor is not required. It would be so simple a solution, you see, and yet so terrible to admit. Pride? Ah yes, pride. And pain. Doctor, you must swear you will never repeat what I am about to tell you . . ."

"I am a doctor, sir."

"Forgive me," he said, lowering his head. "I scarcely know what I am saying. Give me a moment."

His downcast eyes were looking into the amber liquid in his glass. He swirled the glass, watching the liquid lap at the rim—watching the liquid, but seeing something else reflected in those dark depths; seeing some memory trapped in the moving mirror, a memory he wished to drown there, but which was capable of surviving beneath the surface until, in an unguarded moment, it would rise, twisting and bloated, like some monster from the deepest fathoms rising to the surface to devour the fragile vessels of happiness.

For long minutes he stared into the liquid looking glass, and then suddenly he raised it, and this time he drained the contents—this time he drank those reflections, and shuddered as they sank into his belly.

And there, too, they survived . . .

Fengriffen set the empty glass down and leaned against the chimneypiece; passed a hand across his brow. I knew that he would speak softly, and moved closer to him, on a tangent, so that he would not be distracted by the motion.

"One evening," he said, "some eight or nine months ago, I returned unexpectedly from town. I cannot recall just when this was, in days, but it was before her symptoms had become so pronounced—before we were aware of her pregnancy, that is, although it must have been within a week or two of the conception. Well, I had been in town on business, and planned to stop the night, but the business was settled more quickly than I had expected, and I found myself able to return by the last train. I had left my carriage in the village, and proceeded home as soon as I had detrained. The house was in darkness when I arrived. I awoke the stable lad, of necessity, but saw no reason to disturb Jacob and let myself into the house. I went directly upstairs. It was necessary to pass my wife's room on the way to my own, as it still is, and I moved as quietly as possible to avoid awakening her as I passed the door. Just as I had advanced that far, I heard a sound which caused me to pause. It came from Catherine's room, a faint

murmur which could have been whispered conversation or inarticulate mumbling. I could not tell. I was not suspicious, and believed her to be dreaming or experiencing a nightmare; wondered if I should wake her. It was quite late and I paused, debating, and heard these sounds increase. I said I was not suspicious, but suddenly a cold fear enveloped me as the sounds become more distinct. I advanced silently and listened at her door—a shameful act, I realize, but perhaps you can understand the torment of such a moment, the impulsive desire to know the truth, the manner in which jealousy may affect honour and judgement and cause one to act in a fashion unsuitable to a gentleman. But enough of such excuses. I advanced shamelessly to her door and placed my ear against the panels.

“And then I knew the sounds, Doctor. They were the noises of love.”

Fengriffen’s face was dark and stormy and he looked directly at me now, his eyes smouldering with feelings even deeper than the molten jade of jealousy.

“The noises of love, Doctor,” he repeated.

“Sounds with which I was well acquainted. Pantings and stirrings and soft moans, murmurs and sighs and the metallic protest of the bedsprings. And they were not recognized objectively, for I was aware of my wife’s own voice emitting these non-verbal but expressive—oh so expressive—intonations. When one lives as a husband to a woman, he learns to recognize the peculiarities of her frenzy, the pitch and cadence of her passion, the rhythm unique to the woman he loves. And in that manner these sounds were transmitted to my brain, the sibilants piercing, the gutturals bludgeoning, the timbre vibrating with shattering effect.

“I stood, my mouth gaping open—forced open, as though to provide an exit for the rage and jealousy which welled up to proportions too great to be contained within my breast. And then those emotions escaped me, in the form of a strangling cry, and I rushed at the door in a blind rage. It was barred. I battered against it with my fists and kicked with my feet. At the violence of my attack, the noises within Catherine’s room ceased abruptly. The door held and I stepped back, as a terrible hush fell over the house. Into this silence my agony expanded. The silence seemed worse than the sounds. I threw myself at the door once more, and this time it yielded and flew open. The lock was torn from the frame and fragments of wood hung dangling across the entrance, the door itself swung back and crashed against the wall. It was a stout door and a strong lock, but in that instant my strength had been supernatural. Nothing organic and fashioned by human craft could have stood against me. But the explosive effort

had drained my momentum, and I staggered against the splintered frame for support, and looked into the room while those jagged shards swayed up and down before me; looked past those broken sticks and saw a scene which burned itself into my mind.

"Catherine was sitting up in bed. She was naked. The bed-clothes were disarranged and trailed onto the floor. She turned her face towards me, mouth open and eyes glazed, and for a moment she appeared not to recognize me—appeared unaware of where she was, or who she was. Her white flesh glistened with perspiration, her hair was dishevelled, and she had raised one slender hand to her throat. I noticed the pulse beating in the hollow of her neck and the way her bosom rose as she inhaled heavily; noticed, in vivid detail, all these aspects of her appearance, and then, looking beyond her, saw that the window was open. The shutters had been thrown wide, and the curtains were drawn outwards, as with the passage of some departing form—carried after some body, in the rush of flight. Even as I looked, these curtains slid back into the room.

"I was at the window in three strides, but the night was black. Perhaps it is fitting that this night was black, black as the tomb of love, black as the crypt of respect, untouched by the moon which had lighted other times. I looked out, but could see nothing; turned back to Catherine and, as I did so, I became aware of a stench pervading the room and assaulting my nostrils—a strange and mouldering odour of decay, as might have been left by a man who has travelled on foot through the rotting autumnal forest. This odour coiled sharply up my nasal passages, agitating and causing me to choke and gag. I fought against revulsion and moved back toward the bed. The heavy scent faded as fresh air poured into the room, and my nostrils stopped tingling. Catherine had not moved, other than to turn her head as she watched me cross the room, but her eyes had brightened. There is a certain way in which her eyes begin to shine at such moments—a light from within, piercing the clouded lenses like sunlight as an overcast sky begins to break. I observed this change. My raging emotions had frozen into objective calm, as though feeling had solidified into a protective barrier of ice before my brain, and it was from behind this defensive wall that I looked at Catherine.

"She is my wife, Doctor. I have loved her, and I have seen, in blissful moments, how she appears when the physical act of love has been completed. And that, Doctor, is just how she appeared at that moment.

"That is exactly how she appeared . . ."

Fengriffen stopped speaking and spread his hands in a shrug which did not signify indifference.

"I accused her of infidelity, of course. There was . . . is . . . no doubt of it. I did not accuse her at the moment, could not bring myself to utter a solitary syllable, but went to my room where I lived through the most terrible night of my life. But in the morning I accused her. What would any man have done? She did not deny the charge—did not even comment upon it, but gazed at me as though I were incomprehensible—as though she did not understand my words. But there was nothing she could have said, at any rate. The results of my accusation?" He smiled sadly. "It was as if I had been in the wrong, Doctor. Since that night I have been refused admission to her bedroom, exactly as though I had wronged her."

Fengriffen left the fireplace and walked along the side of the room; turned at the corner and passed slowly along the bookcases. I saw the tightness of his clenched jaw cause his cheeks to harden in ridges, and he struck his fist into the open palm of his other hand several times, but without force.

"If she has been unfaithful . . ." I said.

He stared at me.

"Have you not driven her further away? Surely your own behaviour has been altered by the belief?"

"No, no! Doctor, I am willing to forgive her. I have told her so. I will forgive her anything, if forgiveness will regain her love, for I love her beyond recrimination, beyond jealousy, beyond even pride. She will not allow forgiveness, will not listen to my words, does not care. She does not wish my forgiveness, Doctor, for she despises me."

"A woman's reaction to her own guilt . . ." I began.

"Guilt be damned! Find out why she has ceased to love me. Tell me what to do. It was shortly after that terrible night that the initial signs of pregnancy appeared. I hoped that it would bring us closer. You know that it had the opposite effect. My child and heir will be born, Doctor, but to what situation? Cure her of this madness before the child arrives, for the love of God!"

And he confronted me with such an expression of dumb agony and bewildered pain that I looked away from his face. When I looked up, Fengriffen had left the room. I sat alone in the light of the fading fire, turning the possibilities over in my mind and attempting to shape insight into the framework of facts. I was not at all convinced that Catherine had been unfaithful to her husband; found his whole painful tale rather unlikely, too vivid and too obviously contorted by his own fears and feelings. On the other hand, I felt that he had at last told me the truth as he saw it, and that something out of the ordinary had taken place in Catherine's bedroom. Fengriffen's supposition was the most logical and simplest; was strengthened by Catherine's refusal

to deny the fact, and by her spurning of his proffered forgiveness, and yet I could not think her subsequent behaviour in line with this solution; could not, somehow, see her as a woman who would admit another man to her bedroom and commit adultery within her husband's home. If she truly no longer loved him, there was nothing I could do and nothing I should attempt to do, for dying love is without the range of science. But she had told me that she loved him, and I believed her. She had also told me she had not been unfaithful, granting me the denial which she kept from Charles. It created a paradox and forced a new approach, a new alternative. Ah, there was an alternative, and it had been gradually taking form in my thoughts; a figment of the mind which I had never before encountered, but had studied as a classic aberration, and which could have accounted for her behaviour. It was a frightful, malignant disarrangement of reality, unfounded and uncommon, a fixation from a darker age which should not have survived the light of reason, but which had found fertile ground in Catherine's mind when, inflamed and distorted by the woodsman's terrible tale, she had returned to this house. But, dreadful as it was, it could be treated and cured, once I had discovered how she came to formulate such a concept. That would be the problem. Where had this hallucination seized her? Where had she acquired the germ of the idea?

Contemplating this, I gazed idly about the room; looked into the long wedges of shadow at the corners, at the orange embers of the fire, and the volumes which lined the walls . . .

I paused.

Fengriffen had mentioned that Catherine spent long hours alone in this room. At the time, that fact had assumed no importance, beyond her obvious desire for solitude, but I saw it now in a different aspect; felt, with a sudden certainty, that the answer lurked somewhere amongst the collected knowledge on these shelves. I did not know what book it would prove to be, but was positive that one of these ancient volumes held the secret; was certain that Catherine, in bewilderment and distress, had turned to these books, seeking a name for her turmoil. And, as surely as one may turn to learned works for knowledge, so may one turn to books for evil, without desiring evil, guided by frustration and doubt. The image was vivid. I could see the poor woman, caught up in feverish fear, driven to these books in a desperate attempt to understand what she believed was happening.

I rose from my chair and moved along the shelves; drew several volumes out at random. The backs were free of dust, but the tops had eluded Mrs Lune's diligence and carried mantles of flaky grey undisturbed through the years. I glanced at the titles; found that the

library was stocked at random, with volumes on diverse subjects in no particular order but in every field of knowledge.

On the second circuit, I found the book I sought.

I knew, even before I pulled it from the shelf, that it was what I sought; knew, also, that it was the worst it could have been; drew it down and saw that the top was without its coat of dust, and that Catherine had delved into it more than once.

The book was *Malleus Maleficarum*.

It was the illustrated Paris edition of 1497, that wicked classic which had given rise to the inquisition, that sinister work of demonology which had caused torture and torment beyond reckoning and crystallized the black fears of superstition into hysteria. And now once again, in an age when it should have lost its terrible power, it had struck at Catherine's bewildered mind.

I carried the book to the table, conscious of the weight and the scent of old leather and of something more—perhaps the evil which pervades those pages; carried it with my arms outstretched, subconsciously keeping the foul object away from my body, and placed it down on the binding. I ran my hand across the pages, and let the book fall open where it would; let the binding bend where it had most recently and most often been folded.

It dropped open in the second part.

I looked at the page, knowing beforehand what the subject would be. Incubus.

Sexual relations with the demons.

That was the subject . . .

I did not trouble to read those lines which had devoured Catherine's reason; closed the book quickly, as though it were a Pandora's box from which evil spirits and monstrous devils would fly at me—intangible and without substance, and yet able to create concrete destruction. I returned the book to the shelves, and found that the hair upon the base of my skull had risen, as I realized what infernal torment the poor woman had been put through. Despite the hour, I felt I must speak with Catherine without delay, and summoned Mrs Lune without informing Fengriffen. Mrs Lune was reluctant to disturb the mistress; hemmed and hawed and offered excuses until at last I convinced her of the urgency, and she led dubiously up to Catherine's room.

Catherine was awake in bed, the covers mounded over her swollen stomach and her eyes alert in anguished face. She seemed surprised at my entrance. Mrs Lune hovered by the door, nervous and uncertain.

"I must speak with you," I said.

Catherine frowned.

"I told him . . ." Mrs Lune began.

"It's all right. You may go."

Mrs Lune looked relieved; departed, leaving the door ajar. Her footsteps echoed down the hall. I moved to the side of the bed and sat on a chair; leaned forward and spoke with urgent demand.

"You must tell me what you believe to be true, Madam. For the sake of your sanity, and your unborn child. I am a doctor. You must remember that, and think nothing of embarrassment or shame."

"Shame? What do I care for shame? There is nothing you can do, you waste your time here."

"I can listen."

She smiled grimly.

"I know more of this matter than you, Doctor, with all your science and learning. I know from experience."

"Then, perhaps, I shall learn from you."

She looked startled at this.

"Do you know what has happened to me?" she asked.

"I know what you think has happened."

"Have you heard of such things?"

I nodded.

"Very well, then. I shall tell you, Doctor. You will not believe me, but you shall hear the truth."

She smiled again.

Then she spoke.

"I resisted. You must believe that, Doctor. I resisted with all my strength, but resistance was useless. It was not a physical thing, you understand. It was my will which faltered and yielded. What it was or how it was possible, I do not know. I have searched the books in the library and found certain terms and names which may apply, and yet they are no more than the names of superstition and witchcraft and sorcery; of self-deceit and ignorance. This was none of those. And it was real. If I am mad, then madness followed the reality. If it was a dream, then dreams are real. And if any ordeal could have been more terrible, then the human mind cannot conceive of it.

"It came in the night, Doctor. It came, whatever it was, each night that I slept alone. The prelude was the feeling of stifling weight and cold, and each time it came it was heavier and colder; each night it seemed to have greater substance. Instead of a chill in the air, it became a form of coldness which moved in from the window and lay beside me and, at length, covered me. What is a spirit, a shade,

a ghost? No more than a shape of temperature?"

"I lay in silence as this presence came to me, and whimpered with fear at its touch; willed it to be gone and struggled—for weeks I struggled—against it. But each night my struggles were less. It did not hurt me. There was no pain, and even the cold was not unpleasant, but the sensation was so horrible, so inhuman, that I felt myself being dragged into a different dimension, a different plane of existence, a different sphere of reality. And I knew, with overwhelming self-hatred and loathing, that I would eventually be sucked away. Perhaps my will was weakened, because I knew it was futile, but that does not matter—what does a night, a week, a month matter, when the result must inexorably be the same."

"And so I surrendered."

"The thing took solid form. As it solidified it emitted a hideous odour of brimstone and rot and the cold lessened; the molecules of the air compressed until I could see the shape of this thing. It was wavering and transparent, but it had form. It whirled in the air above me, and then it descended upon me. I had no energy left. My thighs parted. I felt the clammy caress and closed my eyes, for I did not wish to see it; pressed it away with my hands, listlessly, and found my arms passing through it with sluggishness, as though through a heavy liquid. The odour caused my brain to spin, thick and fermented and foul the fumes passed into my mind. And then this being took me."

"I felt it enter my body."

"I felt it tremble and heard an unearthly moan, as though a great wind had risen within the confines of my room—or perhaps within my body itself. It moved. I moved with it. God help me, I could not keep myself from joining in that terrible coupling. I do not know how long it took but finally I felt the thing complete the act; felt the hideous emission within me."

"Then it drew away, whining, from my body. It swirled above me for a time, and then departed. The curtains moved with its passage, and I was alone again, trembling and quivering and . . . how do words describe such feelings? What more can I say?"

"After that, the being returned every night. I no longer offered even token resistance, my power had been destroyed by the spiritual burden deposited in me. I waited for its coming with loathing and horror and yet, terrible to say, with expectation. The sensations of the act were not unpleasant. I was dazed. But I awaited it, and each night it came to me. I had become the mistress of this being, and each night I awaited its pleasure. I joined into the act with this thing of horror, and sank to the depths of evil."



"And then, one night, it failed to come."

"And that night, I knew the terrible fate it had brought to me; knew that its mission was ended, and that it would come no more."

Catherine's eyes were wild, and that bitter smile played grotesquely over her lips.

"And so I have told you," she said. "Now perhaps you may tell me something, Doctor?"

I said nothing.

"You have read *Mallus Maleficarum*?"

"And *Dictionnaire Infernal* and *Alexicacon* and a dozen more, yes."

"And what is your opinion on the much debated subject, Doctor?"

"What is that?"

"Can incubi reproduce in the body of mortal woman?"

She looked down at her enlarged belly and her face twisted into hatred.

"I live in dread of bearing the demon's child," she whispered.

And it was with cold horror that I left her room . . .

I spent a considerable portion of that night in deliberation, wondering whether I should reveal the true nature of Catherine's fantasy to her husband. It was not easy to decide upon the best course. Fengriffen would surely be relieved to find that he had not been made a cuckold, but he was not a man of any great tolerance or understanding and it was difficult to forecast what his reactions would be when he discovered the fiendish delusion under which his wife's sanity sagged. Finally, however, I decided that it would be best to tell him; that my own work, in banishing this monstrous shape from Catherine's mind, would be made easier by Fengriffen's knowledge. But I did not wish to discuss the matter in the library, where the conversation must necessarily be flavoured by our previous discourse; did not wish to speak anywhere in the house. It was such a dark subject that I felt it could be managed far better in the open air and daylight. Thus I waited until we had breakfasted, and asked Charles if he would ride with me.

He shot me an inquisitive glance, but made no comment; nodded his acquiescence. I went to my room to change into clothes suitable for riding, and when I came down again there were two horses saddled and waiting in the forecourt. Fengriffen was holding the reins of his big bay hunter and looking up at the sky. The stable lad held my horse, a rather smallish and placid-looking gelding which suited me perfectly.

"It'll rain today," Fengriffen said.

"Has Jacob pronounced upon it?"

He nodded and swung easily into the saddle.

"Well, we needn't ride far," I said.

Fengriffen nodded again, his face grave. The lad gave me a leg-up and stood back, pushing his cap up in that gesture of habit he possessed, and watching as we set off. Fengriffen was a fine horseman and rose naturally, without thought for the motions, leaving his mind open to concepts and continuing to glance up at the sky from time to time. For my part, I was still turning over possibilities, wondering if I had made a mistake in my decision and how best to convey my meaning in layman's terms which he could grasp; wanting him to comprehend objectively, so that he would understand the dark forces which held Catherine without being shocked or repulsed.

We rode side by side, the hoof-beats dull on the heavy earth, following the contour of the rising land and skirting the trees. Fengriffen's height, and the height of his big bay, combined to give me a feeling of relative smallness beside him; made him seem somehow larger than life as I looked sideways and saw his lean form silhouetted against the overcast sky—larger in the way that an elongated El Greco is larger, and grim as a Goya. We moved the horses at a walk for some half hour, until the house was no longer visible around the turning of the forest's contour, and then he reined in suddenly and looked at me down his nose, from that great height; placed his hand against my horse's bridle, as though he did not trust my ability to halt the beast. His nostrils flared and his steed pawed the ground restlessly.

"Well?" he asked.

"Let us dismount."

We did so. Fengriffen secured the horses loosely to the limb of the nearest tree. An outcrop of grey stone jutted from the woods at this point, a wedge of rock through which gnarled oaks twined their twisted ascent and probed and burrowed with sigmoid roots between the stones. I sat upon the rocks and Fengriffen placed one foot beside me and leaned over, his elbow on his knee. Dismounted, he still seemed disproportionately angular. The horses eyed us with patience, but Fengriffen was not patient.

"Well?" he asked again.

"There is an abnormality in your wife's mind," I began, carefully choosing my words. His lips moved, and I held one hand up.

"Wait. Don't interrupt me yet. Hear me out before you speak. It is abnormal, but hardly insane. However, if allowed to persist, there is every danger that it may cause insanity. It is a belief which was quite common in former times—in the Middle Ages. But it is not common now, and the uniqueness in itself makes it far more dangerous. It is connected with the curse, but I do not believe it was caused by

the curse, nor by knowledge of the curse. Rather was her mind ripe to seek the curse as a method of self-inflicted punishment. I believe that your wife is suffering guilt for some reason—some act of which I do not know, and doubt she knows herself— and that this feeling of guilt was inflamed and magnified by her credulity concerning the woodsman's tale. The connection has taken the form of a dream, or nightmare, which recurred for a time, and which was of a quality which made it appear real; made differentiation between nightmare and reality impossible to her . . . ”

“Dreams? How can dreams do this?”

“Because, to Catherine, they are not dreams. They are real. They are far more real than whatever has caused her guilt, for her mind has failed to countenance that—has blocked it from her consciousness as a protective measure. But this must be the starting point. If I am able to delve beneath her conscious memory and discover the reason for her guilt, I may be able to deal with it. It might well be a long and tedious process . . . ”

Fengriffen took his pipe and tobacco pouch out and began to stuff the mixture into the bowl with great concentration.”

“Could this guilt be rooted in infidelity?”

“It could. But not, I think, on the instance you are referring to. And, then again, it could have any of a hundred other motivations.”

“And these dreams?” he asked. He struck a phosphorus match and applied the flame to his pipe. “What is the nature of her dreams?”

“Sexual.”

Fengriffen scowled, but not with anger; rather with the effort to understand; scowled with the pipe stem clamped in his teeth and ribbons of smoke rising above him.

“You should understand that sexual guilt need not have a sexual cause,” I told him.

He said nothing.

“Do you know what an incubus is?”

Fengriffen nodded slowly; took the pipe from his mouth.

“A demon or devil which seeks intercourse with mortals, is it not?”

“That, and more.”

“But that is an absurdity.”

“To you and me. Not to Catherine. You have, in your library, a volume which deals with such things—deals not as science would deal, but with all the evil belief of an unenlightened age and superstitious faith. Your wife has read this volume. It is easy to believe that what one reads in print is fact. Catherine could not admit that her dreams were dreams; could not face the fact that she was experiencing dreams of sexual content. She sought an answer, and found it in the wicked

teachings of that infamous book, at a time when her mind was already disturbed by knowledge of the curse. In conjunction, they formed a cycle. The dreams became increasingly real as her mind became inflamed, and her mind was driven further from reality as these dreams intruded more and more."

"But why should she have had these erotic dreams?"

"There again is the unknown guilt. It could be something from her past, some long forgotten event of childhood. Or it could stem from a simple need, a failure on your part to satisfy her carnal urges adequately. I think this rather more than likely, in fact. But, and this I must stress, the very nature of her dreams, the very fact that she was unable to admit that they were dreams, proves her innocence."

Fengriffen raised his eyebrows.

"*The lascivious do not become deranged over nocturnal eroticism.* They enjoy it, as a substitute for their desires. It is the person who attempts to repress these sensations and emotions who becomes disturbed. The dread of the sleeping representation of the sexual act increases in proportion to the degree of repression. And, in one with a predisposition to instability, severe repression of erotic desires can lead to fantasies which pass beyond the realm of sleep and persevere into the waking hours. You understand? Your wife cannot believe that she has erotic dreams, and so turns to the curse which began in a sexual crime, and to what she has read of supernatural concepts, as an explanation. She came to believe that a demon was visiting her."

"This surely is madness."

"For ages, it was the accepted explanation. Even the word, "nightmare", comes from this idea. "Mare" was the Old English for demon, you know. I told you the belief is uncommon in our day, but hardly inconceivable."

Fengriffen shifted his foot upon the rocks.

"And the night of which I told you? The night I broke into her room? Is it truly possible that what I believed to be infidelity was really no more than a dream?"

"Possible and, indeed, probable."

He breathed a sigh of dubious relief. The wind had risen, and played through the horses' manes and the sky seemed even darker. The scent of rain was heavy on the air.

"And this can account for her behaviour towards me?"

"Of course. She does not despise you, she despises herself. She keeps you from her, not for lack of love, but to keep her husband from soiling himself with a woman who has cohabited with a demon. Catherine believes herself unclean and unworthy."

chill a foul odour billowed about; an odour so heavy that it seemed

"But a 'cure is possible?"

"I believe so."

"And you will remain here? Remain as long as necessary?"

Fengriffen seemed to have acquired a new confidence in me, following my revelation, and in turn I lost my reticence and doubt about confiding in him—made, I fear, the error of thinking he saw his wife's illness in the same way as I, and understood all the connotations.

"I shall stay at least until your child is born," I told him. "It may not be necessary, after that. The very fact of normal birth and motherhood may be the greatest cure—may cause her to effect her own cure, within her own mind."

"I don't see . . . normal?"

Fengriffen frowned, and I realized he had not followed our conversation to the same conclusions that plagued his wife; that perhaps it would have been better if he did not. But now he began to understand. He began to see the terrible fear which gripped his wife's sanity in the fetid talons of dread. His face changed. His frown gave way to incredulity for an instant, and then turned to horror. He stared at me with hatred, for I had released this evil which flitted and flew through his mind; evil which was beyond his power to rationally dismiss. His countenance became terrible to behold. The muscles writhed beneath the tautly drawn skin.

"She believes that?" he whispered.

"She fears that."

"That, in her womb, she bears a demon's child?"

"Her aberration . . ." I began, feeling an appalling sense of helplessness as I looked into his face; looked beyond his features and into the depths of his emotion.

But Fengriffen was no longer listening to me.

This was the brittle ice of emotion, and it crackled perilously beneath the welter burden of distress.

Fengriffen stamped his foot.

Turf sprang up around his polished boot. He slammed one fist into the other hand, with a sharp crack, and at that very instant the drums of thunder began to roll across the heavens. It was as if the gods themselves shared the man's agony. The sky blackened, echoing the dark sentiments of his countenance, as the clouds altered without changing place; rolled ponderously over to present the darker side of this arched ceiling. Through the darkness ran a hook of lightning. It split the blackness, and Fengriffen's eyes gathered in the momentary illumination, reflecting their own dark light. The first drops of rain descended, slow and heavy as lost hope, while the mournful wind

dipped down to toss Fengriffen's hair in wild disarray. He tossed his head back and the hair fell over his brow. He looked less than a man—and more. He looked an idol carved by pagan hands, a colossus fashioned from veined marble and set with obsidian eyes which glowed and revealed the furnace blazing within the cavern of his skull.

Another wave of thunder beat above us.

"You speak of curses!" he said. His voice was hollow, its timbre forged in a chest cavity where the heart had diminished and left a void.

"Far better infidelity than this! Far better madness to idiocy! Madness to loss of all reason, to the slobbering depths of mindlessness!"

His head swivelled back toward the direction we had come; toward the house. He raised his hand and his lips moved without sound. I did not know what malediction he mouthed in that moment, but knew it was terrible indeed.

And then he moved to his horse in two huge strides; jerked the reins free and mounted with a suddenness that caused the brute to shy and stumble; kicked his heels savagely into the animal's sides and blasted off at full gallop, spraying the turf behind him. A clot of muck struck me on the forehead. I wiped it away with the back of my hand and looked after him, shielding my eyes against the angled rain. Something of agony came to me in sympathetic vibrations, and I felt a great weight suck at me; felt my boots sink into the softening ground, as though gravity had singled me out to test its prowess and drag me down into the underworld. For some minutes I stood there, motionless, long after Fengriffen had vanished into the storm. Then my horse whinnied. The sound brought me back to time.

I mounted and rode after him.

The storm was absolute.

I could not see more than a few feet before me, and even those feet were a shifting haze. I was forced to let the horse have his head, and return us with animal instincts, while I cursed myself for a blunderer; castigated myself for having assumed that Fengriffen could possibly have accepted such knowledge with rational objectivity. The horse did not blunder; did not need vision or intelligence, but headed unerringly toward the stables. And what use, I asked myself, is the mind to mankind? Man would survive, without conscious thought, would survive more surely and more efficiently, devoid of that useless by-product of the brain which causes the suffering unique to *Homo Sapiens*, which makes man, alone of all creatures, torment and destroy himself, as I was tormenting myself at that moment, and as Fengriffen was doing on a level beyond words. The mind is the descendant

of the thumb and the vocal chord, and a malformed child it has always been; a mistake of evolution with the unique ability to bring its own extinction. So my own mind told me, as the horse moved on and the rain stabbed through my clothing in a hundred places.

The beast's hooves rattled suddenly, and I knew we had come into the courtyard. Lightning forked down and I saw the house rush at me, and then diminish, as illumination played its optical jest. I kept my head down and my shoulders hunched and waited until we had entered the shelter of the stables before I looked up.

Fengriffen's horse was there, lathered and dripping. The young lad was unsaddling the animal, and glanced up at my entrance.

"Where is your master?" I asked, as I slid from the saddle, loosing a halo of water from my sodden hair.

"Don't know, sir. He seemed in a rare state. Happen he was vexed with the rain, but he leaped from his horse and ran off without a word for me. Took the spade with himself, and all. Peculiar, I'd say."

"The spade?"

"Aye. The one which I uses for muckin' out the stalls. Can't see what he wants with that."

He took the reins from me.

"Did he head toward the house?"

"Couldn't say, sir."

I looked toward the entrance. The rain lashed across. But I could be no wetter than I was, and wrapping my cloak about me, I walked out and started for the house. A light bobbed before me. A moment later the light was a lantern, and old Jacob was peering up at me from his shrunken stature, his face cowed in a rain hood.

"Is the master with you, sir?" he asked.

"He has just left the stables,"

Jacob looked about meaninglessly in the impenetrable rain.

"The mistress's time has come," he said. "We have sent to the village for Doctor Whittle, and Mrs Lune sent me to fetch the master."

"You didn't pass him on your way from the house?"

"No, sir. I wouldn't have come on, if I had."

"Where could he have gone?" I asked, and no sooner were the words voiced than, with a dreadful conviction, I knew where Fengriffen was; knew that, when he had turned toward the house and mouthed those silent words, that they had not been directed at Catherine, nor at the house."

I seized the lantern from Jacob without a word of explanation; knew he must think me mad as I plunged off into the storm; wondered where madness did lie, as I hurried towards the graveyard . . .

The rain was alternating now.

For an instant it would lift, as wind and cloud toyed with one another, and then it would fall again in a curtain as dense as a cataract. Against this liquid tapestry my lantern's feeble beam bounced back, illuminating no more than a yard before me; serving more to blind me in the rebounding glare than to light my path. I slipped and slid in the mud, and several times came close to falling; bumped suddenly against some solid object, giving my shin a nasty rap; saw, in a momentary flash of lightning, that I had banged into an ancient sundial in the gardens, overgrown with slimy moss. It seemed a curious object to encounter on this sunless day; seemed to offer mute testimonial of brighter times. I passed around it, brushed through some shrubbery, caught a glimpse of the fallen tree upon which Catherine had seated herself, and then began to cross the field. Each time the lightning ran across the sky I could see the line of trees before me; each time they were a bit taller, a bit nearer, and I plodded on doggedly, placing one foot before the other and not thinking of time or distance or discomfort, until at last I was within the forest.

The trees offered a certain amount of shelter, but did not increase the visibility, for the lessening of the rain was more than made up for by the gloomy shadows which clung to the ground in the darkness and then threw sudden tressels across the lightning's flash. I held the lantern up and peered uncertainly ahead. I had been there but once, and was not sure of my directions; uncertain at what point I had entered the arboreal perimeter. I advanced a few feet and paused again. The forest seemed different under the onslaught of this deluge. The bows sagged and the rain battered at leaf and limb. I had no idea which way to go.

And then my blood froze.

I heard the sound of the spade.

It was a sodden sound in the heavy earth, and following each thud came a low, coarse grunt of exertion. I moved toward this noise like a sleepwalker, a zombie, a nyctophobe cast into night. The lantern was before me, throwing moths of light which darted through the timber and then vanished in the greater flare of the heavenly currents. I was frightened and I was fascinated and I moved on toward that sound until, without warning, I stepped past a tree and stood at the edge of the graveyard.

Just then another jagged stroke split the sky.

Blinding light blocked the shattered cubes of tombstones and sent white tentacles over the sunken graves, and I looked upon Fengriffen . . .



He was bent over his grandfather's grave.

As the light ran down his profile, dividing him into carnal chiaroscuro, he appeared but half a man. His head was down, he did not notice the lantern which quivered in my hand. He was intent upon his task. He stooped further and lifted. A pile of black earth slid from the spade and ran down the mound behind him. He stopped again as the illumination faded. The darkness dropped between us and my lantern could not reach him. I stood, as rooted to the spot as the tombstones themselves. I heard the spade again, and again, and then another electric tongue tasted the sky and he was thrown into view once more. The mound was higher and he had diminished as he sank lower into the opening grave. As he heaved up, his face turned towards me, blinded in the glare. His lips were squared back from his teeth, and the teeth ivory geometrics. His eyes streamed tears of anguish which mingled with the rain, and his nostrils flared like a hunting beast, scenting its prey. The powerful shoulders bunched with muscle. He lifted and, mercifully for my eyes, the shade fell again. It was through this darkness that I heard the hollow clunk of the spade against the coffin. I closed my eyes. If lightning flashed again, I did not wish to see. There came a brittle sound of shattering wood, rotten with damp age, and then a ripping sound, as of one tearing at a coffin with his naked hands.

He cried out.

He cried in words which fit no language, sounds which symbolized emotions so deeply buried that words had never been conceived to signify their meaning; so dark that they had never been recognized by the conscious mind or the rational tongue.

I heard other sounds from that opened grave.

I could bear no more.

I retreated, staggering and stumbling, to the edge of the woods and sheltered as best I could beneath the spreading arms of an oak and did not think.

Fengriffen came out of the trees a few yards to my right. The storm had ceased. It had ended abruptly some time before. I did not know how long before, or how long I had been sitting beneath that tree. A few drops continued to fall infrequently, and the forest dripped and splattered. Across the field the house glistened and the courtyard gleamed. I stood up as he walked past. He seemed dazed and bewildered, and carried his hands clawed at his sides. The fingernails were torn and bloody from ripping at the wood—what else they had rent asunder, I did not wish to know. I moved toward him, my joints stiff with damp and my muscles protesting the long, motionless

vigil, and he turned without surprise; peered at me without recognition.

I spoke his name.

"What? Yes? What?" he said, syllables without meaning.

"Come back to the house."

"What? Oh, you."

I took his arm.

"You," he said.

"Come to the house."

"Yes. All right."

"The doctor has been summoned."

"What? Why?"

"Your wife . . ."

"Oh. Yes. I see. Yes, I had better be there."

His eyes shifted over me, darting and rolling and blinking. I turned him toward the house and he did not resist; retained my hold on his arm and felt him gradually relax, until he was striding out in a normal manner. We were halfway across the field when it occurred to me that I had left the lantern beneath the tree. I did not bother to return for it. What, after all, is a lantern?

Doctor Whittle's carriage was at the door. I wondered, vaguely, whether he had come through that blinding torrent or sufficient time had lapsed since the storm abated. Jacob ran out to meet us. He was excited and rather pleased, and informed us that Whittle was already with Catherine. Fengriffen nodded, and his face changed from uneasiness to concern. I felt as if I could see his distressing thoughts—the thoughts I had sowed—running from his mind as the rivulets of water slunk around the flagstones at our feet; dropping from his heart as the final heavy blobs were wrung from the voided clouds. Sunlight had pierced the sky, the day had brightened, and Fengriffen's foul deed in the graveyard had served to dissipate his raging energies; had left him calm and reasonable, and allowed his thoughts to return to his wife and child. It had scarcely been a therapy one could prescribe, but it had worked, and perhaps it had been for the best, for there was no telling what alternative measures he might have chosen.

We entered the house.

The servants were scurrying about in preparation. Whittle's voice called out some instructions from above. Fengriffen and I went into the library and found that Jacob had coffee waiting and the fire alight. The wind was sucking flakes of flame up the chimney. Fengriffen smoked furiously, alternating between cigar and pipe as though he could not determine which offered more tranquillity. He felt the nor-

mal nervousness which an expectant father feels, and it was magnified, no doubt, by his hope that the birth would affect a cure and return his wife to him. He tried to sit, but leapt up again each time, after a few seconds, and paced about the room. After several attempts at distracting him with conversation, I too, sank into silence amidst my tobacco fumes. From time to time I looked at my watch. It seemed to be taking a long time, although I had no professional experience of such things. Fengriffen, however, never so much as glanced at his timepiece, as the afternoon wore on. He became, if anything, more calm; did not pace as much, and spent some time at the window, looking out into the gardens with composed features and motionless hands. There was a bird singing in the nearest tree; singing, no doubt, because the rain had brought the worms out, but cheerful none the less.

And, at last, came the cry of a child.

Fengriffen was at the window as it sounded. His shoulders stiffened and for a moment he did not move. Then he spun about and sprang to the door. I followed and entered the hallway in time to see him take the stairs three at a bound and rush down the corridor upstairs. His excitement proved contagious, and I followed at only slightly less speed; arrived at the top of the staircase as Mrs Lune emerged from Catherine's room. Her face was white. Fengriffen had to check his dash to avoid colliding with her, and she made no attempt to move from his way.

"A son," she said. "A fine son."

But there was something wrong with the way she said it. Her tone caused Fengriffen to stare at her for a moment, before he moved past. Doctor Whittle appeared at the doorway, standing directly in the entrance, as if he would bar access. He shot me a meaningful glance over Fengriffen's shoulder—almost, I thought, an imploring glance—as Fengriffen looked past him and into the room; looked from the doorway, as he had looked on that other fateful occasion.

And looked at a scene even more terrible.

I moved to his side and shared this sight. Whittle still looked at me. Catherine was in bed with her child.

It was *her* child.

She held it in the tender arms of a mother, but her face was turned away, as if she could not bear to look. Fengriffen looked. He was rigid beside me, and I felt myself stiffen and grow cold, as my nerve impulses stumbled at the gaps.

The baby bore the blood red mark upon its cheek.

Fengriffen gnashed his teeth. Fengriffen clenched his hands. Fengrif-

fen swayed for a moment, and then regained his balance and took one step into the room. Doctor Whittle, moving backwards, remained between him and the bed, and I advanced to his side. I thought we might be forced to overpower him—to attempt to subdue him—and Whittle thought the same. But Fengriffen took only the one step forward.

"Accursed harlot," he whispered, so softly that Catherine could not have heard him.

He turned the eyes of a cornered beast upon Whittle.

"Is it possible?" he asked.

Whittle peered at him.

"Could her fears have caused the child to be marked in this manner? Could shock or fright have cursed my child with the mark of the woodsman?"

The doctor looked away, embarrassed. His eyes turned to the bed, then dropped. He did not know where to look within that room. Catherine whimpered, keeping her face to the wall. Mrs Lune was at the doorway, her albescent face set with tearful eyes and quivering lips. And Fengriffen turned to me; grasped my collar in his torn hands. Minute details swell in times of stress, and I noticed that he had not troubled to wash the caked blood from his fingers; noticed as those very fingers twisted savagely in my garments, forcing me up and back.

"Tell me! Is such a thing conceivable?"

"I do not know," I said.

"Within the realm of science . . . within knowledge of man . . . is it possible?"

Froth flecked his lips, but his voice was controlled and calm. He might have been Socrates, asking an absurd question to reveal the nature of truth; Diogenes, holding up the twin lanterns of his eyes above an honest man . . . Or he might have been benighted Heracles, wallowing in the Augean filth. I tried to shrug, but my shoulders were held fast in his powerful grip, and the effort brought his hands closer to my throat.

"Perhaps," I said.

"Perhaps?"

"Science is not a cul-de-sac."

His hands tightened even more. I feared he would throttle me. I clamped my own hands upon his wrists, attempting to loosen his hold, but his strength was superhuman—supernatural, even—and my fingers closed over corded bars of steel. I felt the power run down his forearms and flow into torque at my breast; felt that very power run into my own body in a charged current of pure fear, as those fingers, still

bloody from rending a coffin, tightened and twisted. I cried out. Whittle saw my distress. He laid his hand upon Fengriffen's shoulder to restrain him, and that hand virtually leaped away, as Fengriffen's trapezius muscles exploded along the line of his shoulders; reared up until his form seemed hardly human as it towered above me, around me. He drew my face to his. His eyes seemed to expand to preternatural dimensions into which I would be dragged.

"Have you ever known it to happen?" he whispered, with the pulse beating at his throat and spittle at the corners of his mouth.

"Please . . ." I gasped.

He blinked. The pressure lessened. Despite the physical discomfort he was inflicting upon me, it was not an attack—no more does a drowning man in a dark sea attack the driftwood whose buoyancy is salvation—and his eyes were beseeching, his voice pleading. He had not realized the menace in his embrace; realized one thing only; realized that there was one possibility to which he might cling, one floating hope to keep him from the depths, one answer he must seek. But I could not bring that answer to my lips. Never have I felt so helpless, never have I so regretted what little knowledge I may have. I wished, with all my heart, to voice the lie; wished to deceive this pitiful creature and, with my deception, give him peace. But there, across the room, was the child. There, upon the child's face, flowed the hereditary stigma of another man. There, in the poor infant's chromosomes, lurked the genes of a different and baser lineage, waiting to develop. What greater evil to give him hope now, knowing that hope would mutate to suspicion; that suspicion would undergo the lethal catalyst of observation, and become certainty; that certainty would be more terrible by far when, magnified by time, it filled the empty vessel where hope had dwelt.

My lips parted, but the words faltered at the barrier of my throat.

"You-have-never-known-it-to-happen?" Fengriffen said.

His voice mesmerized me. Slowly I shook my head, just once, from side to side, knowing that I was cursing this woman across the room as surely as the woodsman ever had, yet unable to do otherwise. Fengriffen deserved the truth. He watched my head rotate through the gesture of negation as he might have watched a cobra rear back to strike; fascinated by the venomous fangs of denial; pierced by the poison of knowledge; paralyzed by the toxic truth which ran through his veins.

Slowly his hands unclenched.

He pushed me from him with open palms, sending me spinning against the wall. His efforts had reopened his wounds. A smear of blood marked my linen. His eyes fastened upon this; widened. He

raised his hands before his face, fingers hooked, flesh shredded; stared at them with disbelief; with incredulity; stared as he might have stared at some alien objects which had attached themselves as parasites upon the end of his arms.

"Why, I had forgotten that," he said, in amazement.

He shook his head.

He turned toward his wife.

"For that," he whispered, staring at her.

Catherine looked at him then, for the first time since he had entered the room. She jerked spasmodically. A solitary teardrop ran unheeded down her cheek. Her eyes were wide receptacles, gathering the shaft of loathing he hurled at her, and she held the child closer to her breast; held it, not protectively, but as a shield against his hatred.

Fengriffen held his hands up for her to see.

"For you have I torn my ancestor from his grave!" he cried.

And then he was gone.

The echo of his cry howled in the room, and his footfalls were heavy on the stairs. The echo died. The downstairs door banged as its great weight closed.

I looked at Doctor Whittle. Doctor Whittle looked at me.

Mrs Lune came into the room. She was moaning. Her hands were clasped at her breast. She passed us, moving to the bed, and I forced my eyes from our gaze of mutual horror—ah, is horror synallagmatic?—and followed her. I felt I must do something, and it was a greater feeling than that inspired by professional obligation. I leaned over the bed.

"Catherine?"

"Leave me," she said.

Her voice was rational, but there ran a quake beneath the surface, an undercurrent beginning to stir.

"Please hear me."

"Leave me. It is my child. No matter what else it may be, it is my child. Leave us alone."

"You must face the truth!" I said, loudly, wishing to shock her; to bring that subterranean trembling safely out in an avalanche of tears. For, despite the mark which proclaimed her guilt, I still believed her—believed, that is, that she thought her fantasy was fact; that in subconsciously denying the truth she had fashioned a delusion far more terrible than any fact could be.

She shook her head violently from side to side. Mrs Lune perched on the edge of the bed and slipped one arm around her shoulders in futile comfort; shot a vicious glance at me, and then looked sug-

gestively towards the doorway.

"The truth, Catherine!" I shouted. "For the sake of your sanity, and your child!"

"I know the truth!" she screamed. Spittle sprayed from her lips in the intensity of her conviction. The child's face crinkled, preparing for tears. Catherine raised her face, and madness danced in her eyes.

"It is true, true, true!"

She gasped and choked. Doctor Whittle tugged gently at my sleeve.

"Perhaps later," he said.

I nodded. Perhaps too late. I felt a great exhaustion drop over me and my shoulders sagged. Whittle was right. There was nothing I could do. I followed him to the door as Mrs Lune drew Catherine tenderly to her bosom and stroked her hair. Whittle closed the door behind us and sighed; led the way toward the stairs. I paused, for no reason, as we passed through the gallery, and just then came the muffled sound of Fengriffen's horse crossing the courtyard at the gallop—crossing the courtyard toward the woods . . .

Whittle and I sat in the library. The afternoon angles had slanted into evening, and now night spun a shroud for the window. Whittle was waiting for me to speak; looking at me in silence and thinking that I was delving into dark fields where strange blooms grew at night; thinking that I would pluck abstruse theory, like a mythical flower, from the fecund soil of science. Perhaps my demeanour was such as to give this impression, for I was staring intently at the window and my brow was creased. But I looked at a window, no more; did not even penetrate the glass with my gaze. It was beyond theory. The fact seemed undeniable. What Catherine believed—that she had been visited by a demon lover—was absolute truth, for her. What that hideous birthmark signified was absolute truth for me. The two truths existed on different levels, dual dimensions which could not be joined. Whether or not that absolved her of guilt was not a question for science, nor one I would wish to answer.

It was one which her husband must answer, however.

God help him.

Presently Whittle broke the silence.

"It couldn't be possible, I suppose?" he asked, in weary tones.

"What's that?"

"It couldn't be possible that she might have marked her child through fright?"

"An old wives' tale. In accepted theory, it is impossible. In fact? Well, that is more to your experience than mine. Can you offer him

hope? Have you ever known a child to be marked in that way?"

"No," he said, and sighed. "And yet it seems incredible that she could have allowed the woodsman to . . . to . . . that she could have taken that creature from the woods into her room and submitted to . . . incredible."

"But she didn't," I said. "On the level of her own awareness, she did not. Whoever it was—the woodsman, we must suppose—who crept through her window in the night, she truly believes to be the incubus which her unbalanced mind has summoned."

"God help the poor woman," Whittle said. "And God help poor Charles. Can she be cured of this madness? Will he have tolerance enough to judge her innocent in intent, if not in deed? He is not a tolerant man. You know, of course, where he has gone?"

"I fear so."

Whittle had his snuff box out; had placed it on the ornate Regency table and was squaring it with the corner.

"You have known him for years, Doctor," I said. "Is he a man who will kill?"

Whittle shrugged.

Revenge begets revenge.

"He is a Fengriffen," said the doctor.

And into the silence which followed walked Mrs Lune. She was clutching a Bible in her hand, and her eyes were rubescent in the wake of tears. She crossed the room with a determined stride and stood over me.

"The mistress is sleeping now," she said.

"Good," I replied, although I had no idea whether it was particularly good or not, for the footsteps of merciful Hypnos are dogged by his son; Morpheus stalks without pity through the gentle glades of slumber.

"Please, sir . . . may I have a word?"

"Certainly."

She clutched the Bible tighter; clutched it as a preacher grips the rostrum when about to hurl his theology like a gauntlet before the congregation.

"I know as you're a doctor, and trying to do what's right, but sir, if I may say so, there are things you don't understand as well as some. If I may speak my mind, and no offence, sir. The poor mistress has . . . I mean, there are things . . ."

"I am conversant with the details of the curse," I said, to help her out and hurry it on.

Mrs Lune nibbled her lip.

"You see, sir, if you could convince the master that it is true . . . that



the poor mistress is innocent . . . ”

“I will not deceive him,” I told her, rather firmly. I did not want her to continue for it was pointless. “I will do my best to instil tolerance and understanding in Fengriffen, but I cannot serve him duplicity.”

Mrs Lune looked towards Doctor Whittle.

“I’m sorry,” he said.

Mrs Lune knew few words. The thought was in her head, and she struggled for expression; cast her eyes about the walls as though to take, by osmosis, the needed vocabulary from the learned volumes on the shelves.

Her mouth opened.

And a piercing shriek reverberated through the house.

I started and Doctor Whittle started and Mrs Lune, her mouth still open, trembled spasmodically. That scream had not come from her. I leaped up and dashed into the hallway, as a second cry sounded—less shrill, as agony replaced shock, in the timbre. The scream came tumbling down the stairs, turning over and over as it fell headlong and came to a sudden crashing halt against my eardrums. I rushed up the stairs; moved against that descending sound as against a river current; feeling that I swam upstream in the soundwaves.

A third cry did not come.

It was only Whittle’s footsteps behind me that punctuated silence as I threw open Catherine’s door.

Catherine was alone in her bed.

The child was gone.

The room was cold.

Unbelievably cold, colder than air should be, and despite this frigid chill a foul odour billowed about; an odour so heavy that it seemed to be visible. I crossed the room and threw the shutters closed. The fetid stench caused me to gag, and for a moment I leaned against the sill for support; shook my head to clear the lingering fumes before I turned to Catherine.

“The baby,” she said. “It has taken my baby.”

I sat on the edge of the bed and took her hand. Her flesh was moulded from melting ice. She began to babble indistinctly. Whittle stopped in the doorway, recoiling at the olfaction of decay.

“Who has taken the child?” I asked.

Catherine grimaced and contorted. I could see the flesh creep convulsively on her arm, as if the skin were now fastened to the bone.

“Was it the woodsman?”

She stared at me without comprehension.

"Who took the child?" I repeated.

"He took it. He!"

"Who, for God's sake?"

"The father," she moaned.

I took her by the shoulders and shook her. Her hair slipped over her forehead and her neck swayed back and forth. She did not resist, but seemed to welcome the violent motion, and began to throw herself about. I stopped shaking her, but she continued to jerk rigorously and her head banged against the headboards, so that I was forced to restrain her movements. She trembled under hands.

I forced a penetrating sharpness into my voice, and threw the words down through the clouds which hung over her mind.

"The woodsman," I said. "The woodsman took the child. The woodsman is the father. It has been the woodsman all along. You have enchanted yourself into fantasy. The woodsman! The woodsman! It was a man, a living man, no more!"

But Catherine did not hear me.

Beneath those clouds, her mind had turned in upon itself. Like a wounded shark, twisting to devour its own flesh, she tore at the weave of her sanity.

"The woodsman!" I shouted.

"The father," she said. "My baby. His baby. The father. He came for his child. He has taken the baby. Gone, gone, gone. Where, where, where?"

"Catherine!"

Her eyes were suddenly lucid.

She frowned.

"Where?" she asked. "I wonder where they have gone?"

And the shutters came down again. She cringed and twitched and babbled. I sighed and stood up. Mrs Lune appeared, trembling as violently as Catherine; approached the bed warily, Bible held before her.

"Stay with her," I said.

Mrs Lune turned her old eyes upon me. They mirrored a belief I could never dispel. Perhaps it was better that way. She cradled Catherine in her arms.

"Poor innocent," she said.

In the hall, Whittle took my arm.

"For God's sake, what caused that odour?" he asked.

"I don't know. An unwashed body, steeped in the muck and slime of rotting vegetation, befouling itself of filthy habit—what else could it be?"

He shook his head.

"I have dealt with the corruption of death, undiscovered behind closed doors for weeks; have amputated limbs so festered with rotten pus that the flesh separated at the touch. But never have I encountered such a stench. To think that a creature wrapped in that odour has been with Catherine . . ."

He shuddered.

"It must have been the woodsman, come for his child as the climax of revenge."

"What can we do?" Whittle asked.

We moved towards the stairs through the dark arch of the gallery.

"Where do you suppose he will take the child? To his cabin? Or will he do worse? What action can we predict for that debased mind?"

We had started down the stairs.

"I doubt the child is in immediate danger, other than possible exposure. We must recover it as soon as possible. But I doubt the woodsman will deliberately injure it. It is, after all, his own son. He would have no reason to wish it harm; will, more than likely, wish to keep the child, as the incarnation of his fulfilled vengeance."

"Exposure is danger enough," Whittle said. "Pray that he maintains enough human sense or animal instinct to keep the child warmly wrapped. But, Doctor Pope, there is another danger we must consider."

He turned to face me, at the foot of the stairs.

"Fengriffen has gone for the woodsman," he said. "If he is waiting there now, in his state of mind, who knows what he might do? We must make haste; must pursue the woodsman and overtake him before he returns to where Fengriffen waits, and avert . . . avert God knows what act . . ."

I nodded agreement. I knew well what Fengriffen was capable of, when blind rage and agony possessed him; had seen him in the graveyard, and felt the strength of his limbs in the bedroom. It was an innocent baby, but it bore the hated mark of Catherine's shame, and it was well that we should hasten.

We headed for the door, and suddenly Whittle stopped. He winced and closed his eyes. The sound of Catherine's incoherent babbling had pursued us. It was warped, a mutation of human sound, mangled and twisted out of shape as it passed through closed doors, through the floor, through the dense stone of the house itself; elongated as it slid through grain, compressed as it seeped through rock, bent upon itself as it turned the corners and shattered as it dropped through space. It was a sound to climb the backbone with feathery touch and run like morbid plague through the blood.

It was a sound that Whittle had heard before.

He did not have to tell me. I knew.

The sound that Sarah had made, as she lay defiled, and Silas' severed fingers fell upon her lap.

We paused just outside the massive door, with the vast house towering like a monolith above us. I took a deep breath of the air, welcoming the untainted freshness; noticed that Whittle did the same. We both turned toward the stables, but with second thought I stopped him.

"It may well be wiser to follow on foot," I said. "He has only a brief start, and must carry the child. There will be delay while horses are saddled, and it will be more difficult to follow his tracks from the saddle."

Whittle nodded.

We reversed direction, to take up the trail in the muddy earth beneath Catherine's window; had moved only a few strides when hoofbeats clanked on the flagstones, and Fengriffen loomed up in the darkness, very still and straight upon his horse. He did not notice us until I called his name, then he halted and dismounted; let the reins trail free to the ground. The horse stood very still.

"It is done," Fengriffen said.

His rage was gone, he was very calm.

"What have you done, Charles?" Doctor Whittle asked, in the tones of the confessional.

"Done? I have done murder. What else?"

He shrugged.

"What else?" he repeated, and from inside his cloak he drew a revolver; looked at it as if he were pondering the function of such an instrument. The revolver looked very large, very hard, very real. He stared at it and his wrist turned, slowly, until the weapon was directed at his face. I attempted to seize him, but he stepped back, shaking his head.

"No, no. Don't worry. I shall not take my own life," he said. "I was merely looking into the barrel, you see; wondering how it looked to the woodsman, in his final moment of life. It is most curious. Have you any idea how large this little black hole appears? It is so much more than a rifled bore through a cylinder of metal. It is a tear in the stuff of space and time; a black hole in creation; a bottomless shaft which can suck a man's soul down, down . . . down to whatever other dimensions may exist. Or may not. Most curious, indeed. And the woodsman looked into the chasm and he smiled. I find that peculiar, to smile into a rent in the universe. Don't you think that peculiar, gentlemen? His dog snarled and cinged, but the woodsman

smiled, and I shot him dead. I shot him directly in that odious blemish which has destroyed my life, so that the blood flowed out and covered it. And still he smiled. He was dead, but the smile was set up on his lips. He will carry that smile to the grave."

"And then, gentlemen, I stood there for a long time. There was an axe in the corner—perhaps the same axe which my grandfather used—and I stood there for a long long time and wondered if I should use the axe to remove his smile. But, in the end, I did not . . ."

Fengriffen smiled placidly.

"I'm rather pleased that I didn't, you know. It would have served little purpose."

"And the child?" Whittle whispered.

Fengriffen reversed the gun in his hand and passed it to me. I slipped it into my pocket.

"I am no barbarian," he said. "I could not harm an innocent child. My wife must leave, and take her child, as soon as she is able, of course. But I bear no malice towards the infant."

"But where is the child?" Whittle asked. It was a desperate query, for he had already seen the anachronism of our suppositions.

"Where? I don't understand you, Doctor."

"Did not—"

I silenced Whittle with a gesture.

"How long has it been since . . . since you killed him?"

Fengriffen looked confused.

"I have no idea," he said. "How long has passed since I left the house? I rode directly to his cabin. What difference can it make?"

Whittle and I regarded one another.

"What is there that I fail to understand?" Fengriffen asked, swinging his head between us.

There was a great deal we failed to understand . . .

Words were not necessary.

Whittle and I moved to the corner of the house; moved side by side, coupled by the same emotion, while Fengriffen looked after us in bewilderment. The earth was soaked with the storm. Our boots left deep indentations in our wake—deep and unavoidable. We rounded the corner and stood beneath Catherine's window. It was not a great drop. It would have been a simple matter for an agile man to jump from that height, onto the soft earth.

Then we looked at the ground.

There were no prints.

There were no prints but our own.

No man had dropped from that window . . .

"Could she . . . could Catherine have destroyed the child in some manner." Whittle whispered, in horror.

"I do not know. I know nothing."

Fengriffen came around the corner of the house and stared dumbly at us, and we stared at the ground, and as we stood there the wind rose again. It was above us, in the highest trees, and yet in its passing came a wave of unearthly cold; damp cold, as of the mouldering grave. The gnarled oaks moaned, and from a great distance came the forlorn howl of a dog. The wind passed in a moment, and was gone . . . gone, God knows where, scattered and lifted and freed. I looked out across those moors, and shivered. The dog stopped howling. Only Catherine's mad laughter came to replace the wind, echoing through the fabric of that accursed house . . .

## A.C. BENSON

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### The Uttermost Farthing

*Recently the world seems to have rediscovered E.F. Benson, the creator of those two loveable busibodies Mapp and Lucia. Still awaiting a literary resurrection is E.F.'s brother, A.C. Benson. And yet if most people did but know it they are probably more aware of A.C.'s work than almost any other writer. For it was A.C. Benson who wrote the words 'Land of Hope and Glory' to Sir Edward Elgar's famous Pomp and Circumstance march. Arthur Christopher Benson (1862-1925) was the oldest of the three surviving Benson brothers, Arthur, Freddie and Hugh, the sons of Edward White Benson who was Archbishop of Canterbury from 1883 to 1896. All three brothers were prolific writers and all three produced a number of weird and supernatural stories. Whilst Freddie's stories have had a welcome revival, Arthur's and Hugh's are still sadly neglected. 'The Uttermost Farthing' was not published during Arthur's lifetime, but was found amongst his papers by his brother Freddie who ensured its publication in a slim collection of just two stories called Basil Netherby in 1926.*

## 1

Yes, Hebden Hill was the next station, the porter told me, and as the dowdy little train puffed sturdily across the wide green flat, intersected by dykes, which had once been a great bay of the sea, I watched with pleasure the low shapely bluffs, like miniature seacliffs, but now covered with thickets and copses, which bounded the plain to the west half a mile away, and thought how like it was to the background of an old Italian picture. It was a warm summer evening, not oppressive, as there was a fresh breeze from the sea, along which white clouds sailed lazily landward. I could see far out in the plain hamlets and solitary farms nestling among trees; and it was pleasant to see the birds, crested plovers and pearly-grey gulls, that stood motionless, all facing up the wind in the pastures; and a lean grey heron by the old sluice-gate, poring upon the water.

And then I began to wonder how it was that I was going on so vaguely defined a visit to Hector Bendyshe, whom I knew so slightly. What exactly *did* I know about him? He was just an agreeable man, whom one was never surprised to meet at dinner, and whose talk, mildly interesting, seldom flagged. He had been at Winchester and at Oxford; he had been perhaps in the diplomatic service, and had certainly travelled a good deal. He was clearly wealthy, for he had a flat in town, and a house understood to be of an attractive kind in Sussex, at Hebden Hill. But he had done nothing particular for twenty years—he was a man of fifty—he read a good many books, he was fond of music, he was something of a connoisseur. But the more I reflected the less I seemed to know. He had no relations that I had ever heard of, and no intimate friends, though a host of acquaintances; he went everywhere and got on with everybody. He did not seem mysterious or secretive in any way; he talked easily and frankly about his own concerns and pursuits, and indeed on most topics of general interest.

How then had my visit come about? I was myself a so-called literary man, who lived, not very prosperously, in rooms in town, reviewing, writing literary articles, putting together an occasional book, and enabled by my small earnings and a little private income to exist in tolerable comfort. I was just over forty, and the artistic ambitions I had once had, had long vanished; but I was more than content with my life, and my interest in other people was stronger than ever. The unexpected things that happened, the strange contrasts and contradictions of character, the amazing inconsistency of human beings and their intricate relations, so utterly different from and so much richer



than the helpless conventional traditions of fiction—all this had kept alive in me a sense of romance in life which amply atoned for a career which had been disappointing and even humiliating.

I had met Bendyshe at a dinner-party some time in May. I had walked away with him, and he had asked me to his rooms. They were well furnished and comfortable, but with a certain austerity that took my fancy. Our talk had turned somehow on psychical things, in which I was a good deal interested; and before we had talked ten minutes I became aware that Bendyshe had dropped the mask of amiable levity which characterized his habitual conversation, and was speaking seriously and drily, but with a profound sense of conviction, which was quite unlike anything I had ever heard from him.

Suddenly he turned to me, a little sternly, I thought, and said, "But perhaps you are not interested in these things?"

"Yes and no," I said, "but to tell the truth, I am a little surprised to find that *you* are."

"Well," he said, "I don't wonder at that. You see, it has become of late rather a hobby of mine. I will tell you why some day, if you care to know. But tell me one thing: why do you say 'Yes and no'?"

"Because," I said, "in the first place I think that ordinary talk about psychical things is such fearful twaddle. It seems to me a scientific affair; but when foolish people talk about it, it's all a mixture of feeble sentiment and weak imagination."

"That's so," he said; "but if you feel about it like that, why don't you look into it?"

"Because the sort of experiments people try," I said, "such as séances and trances and automatic writing, seem to me more sickening still, like drug-taking; it's like deliberately playing with the ugliest part of one's mind, the part that deals in fear. I don't want to wake that up—I want to think it is not there; and, moreover, I am so much interested in people as I see and know them that I don't want to explore the unknown."

"You want to live in a fool's paradise, in fact," said Bendyshe; and I could see from the pallor of his face and his distended nostrils that I had angered him; but he controlled himself. "No," he added, "I ought not to say that—it was rude and stupid! I apologize."

"No, please don't do that," I said; "it was my fault. What I said was very crude; it was like talking to a man of science about 'stinks' or to an actor about his 'patter'—the insolence of the amateur; that's unpardonable."

"Well, but I *really* want to know," he said rather gravely. "I agreed with you up to a certain point; but what you said amounted to this, that you are so much interested in people when they are alive that

you don't take any interest in what happens to them after they are dead?"

"Yes," I said, "that is quite fair. I am immensely interested in what I can see and observe and infer in people. It seems to me dramatic, exciting, sometimes very beautiful. But I'm a homeless man and a bachelor, and I don't get very near to them. I only see the polite side of life; and when people disappear, as they unhappily do, and I can't follow them further, why, I turn back to what I can see and know."

"I understand perfectly," he said; "but it's just the other way with me. People seem to me so amazing, so incredibly fine at times and so unutterably low at others, that I can't believe it all begins and ends here, and I find myself consumed by the most intense curiosity, to use rather a feeble word, to know what the next act is. It seems to me all like a big rehearsal for something, full of trivial, grotesque, and annoying things—two people playing nap, a girl eating a sandwich as she waits for her cue—but the play is going on all the time, and everybody has his part. I feel that I *must* know what is behind it all, if it can be known. I'm not exaggerating when I say that I have thought many times of putting a pistol to my head in order to find out what does happen; but I doubt if it can be found out that way."

He was silent for a little; musing inwardly. I watched him as he sat. He was a tall lean man, finely formed and modelled. He had close, crisply curling black hair, a little grizzled. His forehead was high, his eyebrows black, and he had large dark eyes which it seemed to me I had never seen fully opened before. He was clean-shaven, and his nose, straight and clean-cut, came down on a short upper lip; but the under-lip was full, and the chin perhaps a little large for symmetry. He had a slightly worn air, but his face, which was hardly marked by wrinkles, had a fresh colour like that of a man who lived much in the open air. If anything his expression was a little judicial; but when I had seen him on previous occasions, his prevailing expression was one of tolerant good-humour and friendliness. It had never occurred to me that he could be formidable, and indeed my impression had been that, if anything, he over-valued serenity and equanimity. There was nothing ascetic or scholarly about him. His hands were large and mobile, and had, I thought, more expression than his face; and his dress had a touch of negligence about it which became him well.

I had never thought him a particularly interesting man, because he never gave himself away or appeared to have any preferences. But now I had seen something very different, something alert, passionate, even terrifying.

But when he began to talk again, his mood had changed, and he

was his old wary and kindly self.

"By the way," he said, "what do you generally do in the summer?"

"Oh, I stay about a little," I said; "but I have to stick pretty close to my work, you know. I'm a literary hack, and I have to be waiting on the stand in case of a call. If I happen to be in funds, I go to a quiet hotel somewhere—I rather like exploring the country; old houses and churches are the next most interesting things to people. But I generally end by being a little bored."

"I wish you would come down and stay with me for a week or two," he said. "I have got rather a nice old house in Sussex, and it is a pleasant country. It is very quiet, and you could work if you wanted to, or wander about. I should like to talk this matter over with you."

"Thank you very much," I said; "I should enjoy it immensely. Where did you say it was?"

"Hebden Hill," he said. "Not very far from Ashford—it's a biggish village. I'll drop you a line."

## 2

That was at the end of May. I heard nothing more for a month and began to think he had forgotten all about it, or that he was perhaps sorry that he had shown me the inner side of himself. But at the end of June I had a note asking me to go down on July the 7th, and an hour or two later a wire. "Am unexpectedly alone, and should be glad to see you to-morrow Thursday if you can manage it but don't alter arrangements. Would meet the train arriving 6.30. Hope you can stay a fortnight."

It seemed to me a little peremptory perhaps. No, I had no engagements, and I was glad to get out of the heat of London, so I wired an acceptance, packed my books and papers, and went; and now that I was embarked I began to have a curious feeling that I was in for an adventure of some kind, not very pleasant.

However, I arrived in the summer twilight. Bendyshe was on the platform to meet me, and I could see from the civility of the officials that he was not only an important personage, but a highly popular one. He had a pleasant word for everybody, and he introduced me formally to the station-master, saying gravely, "It's very important that my friend Mr Hartley should form a good impression of the place; you know, he writes in all the papers, and could make our fortunes by a paragraph."

"Indeed, sir?" said the delighted station-master. "I'm sure you're very welcome to Hebden Hill, sir. We're old-fashioned, but going ahead a bit nowadays."

Bendyshe had a good car waiting. The station was at the bottom of the hill; and he motored me swiftly up a steep irregular street of red-brick and timbered houses with pleasant gardens—a most comfortable and homely place. At the top of the hill we turned into a small square or piazza, with five or six substantial eighteenth-century houses. Fronting the west end of the church was a long mellow brick wall with big gateposts and a gate of fine ironwork. Behind this there appeared a handsome façade; a brick Georgian mansion with a pediment, a solid pillared doorway, seven windows above and three on each side of the door, and a round window in the pediment. It was evidently the chief mansion of the village. The windows had old heavy casements painted white, and the house was flanked at each end by fine old sycamores.

"Here we are," said Bendyshe. "It's called the Manor-house, but it's not my idea of a manor-house at all!"

Inside appeared a white-painted, marble-flagged hall, heavily panelled and pillared, with two mahogany doors on each side and a broad balustraded staircase ascending under an arch at the end. It was all a little bare. There were a few portraits and some solid Chippendale chairs. A venerable and portly butler met us.

"Perhaps you would like to stroll round before you go and dress?" said Bendyshe. "It's a good thing to get one's bearings clear at once."

He showed me first a room to the left of the front door, a small dining-room panelled with dark oak. Here there were more portraits, and a fine Italian bust of a young man in red porphyry, evidently a masterpiece. The next room was a little library almost lined with books, with a big french window which opened on to the garden. "This is *your* room," said Bendyshe, "and you can have it entirely to yourself to work in. My own study is upstairs."

The door to the right of the front door led to a smoking-room, a comfortable place with a few red leather arm-chairs and some old dark landscape pictures in oil. "This is everybody's room," said Bendyshe. "That other door leads to the back regions; but now we'll have a look at the garden."

We went out through a door under the stairs. I could not restrain an exclamation of delight. We came out into a portico supported by pillars extending along the whole centre of the house, between two flanking shallow wings; it was paved with black-and-white marble, and furnished with some comfortable oak seats and tables.

The garden was not large, but beautifully designed. On each side

it was walled, and shielded from intrusive eyes by a row on either hand of sycamores, fine old trees. The lawn was perfectly plain, but for a fine leaden statue of a youth with clasped hands looking upwards towards the house—a most enchanting piece of work. At the far end, sheltered by a low wall, was a great flower-border, blazing with colour; and as we drew near, I could see that the ground fell rapidly—to a tiny park with clumps of trees on either hand, and beyond, a magnificent view of a great green plain with low wooded ridges and blue shadowy hills to the right, while a mile or two to the left we could see a wide expanse of sea.

I said something feeble about the wonderful beauty of the place, and its magnificence.

“Well, that’s rather a tall word,” said Bendyshe. “It isn’t big house really, and the domain extends to about fifty acres. But it is cleverly designed, and makes the best use of every inch of earth and sky.”

“Has it been long in your family?” I said.

“No, indeed,” said Bendyshe; “I bought it just as it stands, furniture and all, from the last member of an old family—the Faulkners—that had come to hopeless grief. It was in an awful state—the house almost ruinous, the park full of weeds and thorn bushes. No one would look at it. But I heard of it by what we call accident, just when I wanted a house, about fifteen years ago, and saw its possibilities. I got it very cheap, and I really have not spent much money upon it. But I have got uncommonly fond of it, and feel as if I had lived here all my life, and a little more.”

The light was beginning to fade as we went back to the house, which I found was all lit by electric light, carefully subdued and shaded. We went upstairs. There was a corridor above the hall, only not so wide, with three doors on either side, and one to the right, close to the head of the stairs; and these I must describe with some particularity.

The first door on the left as we came up—the staircase had turned round to the right, so that we were facing in the direction of the front door—led to two staircases, one going up to the attics and one descending to the offices. The second door on the left led to Bendyshe’s bedroom, a very bare place, with a press or two and a few books; then came a bathroom with a door from the bedroom, and opposite the door, another door led into Bendyshe’s study, which communicated with the corridor by what was the third door on the left. The study was entirely filled with books, had a big table covered with papers, and two very uncompromising oak writing-chairs. A room less luxurious I have seldom seen. It had no ornament but a single picture, a very beautiful portrait of a girl, fair-haired and blue-eyed,

with an expression of the most perfect naturalness and simplicity, and full of animation and delight. The room had two windows, one looking out to the church, the other down towards the village.

We went out again into the corridor. The door opposite Bendyshe's study was my bedroom, one window of which looked towards the church, and the other on the great sycamore by the corner of the house. A little bathroom was attached. The room was furnished with great comfort, and had some fine water-colours. Returning down the corridor, the two other doors opened into the bedrooms similar to mine, each with a bathroom, and at the end, close to the head of the stairs, the remaining door led into another bedroom, which looked out on to the garden. But this room was wholly unfurnished, just a bare-boarded, white-panelled place, with that peculiar and unpleasant staleness that develops in an unventilated sun-baked room.

"I don't like this room," said Bendyshe. "It was the room, to tell you the truth, in which the scoundrel from whose heirs I bought the property came to his miserable end. It's a squalid story; and as for the room, well, I think there is something sinister about it. What do you feel? Yet it's a pity not to use it, because it has the finest view in the house!

"I don't know," said I; "I think that the best way to exorcize disagreeable associations is not to fasten things up, but to let in a new current of pleasant usage."

"Yes," said Bendyshe; "if I had children, I should make this their schoolroom--then it would be all right!

An hour later we dined--a well-appointed meal, though a simple one, very promptly served.

"I don't know what you feel," he said to me, "but it always seems to me rather uncivilized to dawdle over food." He himself ate rapidly, but with appetite, and drank a glass or two of wine. After dinner we withdrew to the smoking-room. Bendyshe was in his familiar mood, full of little anecdotes and reminiscences. When we had established ourselves with coffee and cigars, he said, "Now let me first say how glad I am to see you here. I have a notion that we agree, more than perhaps appeared the other night, about that matter we spoke of; and I think you can help me very much, if you are disposed to do so. I think you are a fair-minded man and impartial. Would you mind telling me exactly where you stand? Or perhaps you are tired and would like to defer it? Tomorrow night, I ought to say, the parson, Fortescue by name, is coming to dine, a very interesting and remarkable man, so that if you would like to leave it alone, we must wait till the day after tomorrow--the evening is the only time to talk seriously about things."

"I should like to start at once," I said. "But tell me, what did you mean by saying I could be of use to you?"

"Why," said Bendyshe, "living alone, as I do, and with but few people to talk things over with, one gets into a tangle. I generally have a visitor or two here, because solitude unadulterated is not a wholesome thing. But they are not the sort of people I can really talk to; and just now I have got hold of some new material—I am always collecting materials—and it doesn't seem to fit in with my ideas. But the point is this—how much and how little do you believe?"

"Oh," I said, "my position is a simple one. It's all just a question of evidence. Any materials ought to be rigidly scrutinized—one mustn't either accept or dismiss evidence summarily—and then one may begin to draw conclusions."

"Yes," said Bendyshe; "that's very much what I believe. But it's uncommonly hard to trace these psychical stories to their source. I have tried to unravel a good many, and it gives one a deplorable opinion of the value of human evidence. But," he went on, "before we begin, I must tell you in as few words as I can how I came to set to work. I don't like to talk about it—it's like tearing open an old wound—but I must make this plain. Some twenty-five years ago I became engaged to a girl, the daughter of a parson; you saw her picture, perhaps, in my room. You must take it on trust from me that she was a wonderful creature, and gave me not only a new view of life, but something to live for.

"We arranged everything. We were to have lived in London, and I was actually thinking of standing for Parliament, when just a month before our marriage she caught diphtheria and died within the week. I can't tell you what an appalling catastrophe it was for me. It had seemed to me that her love was the one thing I had been waiting for all my life, the one thing that had given me a reason for living. You see, I was an only son, entirely trusted and indulged by my parents, and with plenty of money about and no motive for exerting myself.

"The thing very nearly drove me mad. A week before she had been with me, answering every question I had asked of life, and giving me the very water of life to drink. And now she was gone without a word. The last time I saw her she didn't even know me. She was in torture and half-unconscious. And there was nothing left, not a trace or a sign or the faintest message to me whom she loved best, or to any other human being—and there were many that loved her. It was so utterly unlike her, and yet there it was. Her parents were what is called "wonderful". They had a strong religious faith, and it helped them through."

Bendyshe stopped with a kind of gasp, gripped the arms of his chair, and abandoned himself for a minute to a paroxysm of misery. "It all comes over me again," he said. "Don't look at me—I shall be all right in a minute."

Presently he went on in a low voice: "I hardly know what I did. I travelled, I did some exploration, I courted death, but it never came near me. But I never had the smallest sense of contact with her, or even of any thought coming from beyond.

"Then I came back and tried to occupy myself in many ways—what is called social service. But I'm a hopeless individualist, and I don't care about my fellow-men simply as such, and I was taken in many times.

"Then I started this work, and it began to seem to me the one thing worth doing—to find out, if I could, whether there was any possible contact with the spirits of the dead, whether they existed at all. I had all kinds of sickening experiences, but could find nothing definite.

"And I never could cross the threshold, though I came to believe that, under certain obscure conditions, living minds could communicate direct with each other, apart from material agencies. And then the case seemed worse to me than ever, because it all seemed to depend upon material existence as a necessary condition."

Then after a moment's pause, he went on slowly and rather wearily:

"And what makes things even worse is this. There are a good many stories of appearances which seem to have some element of truth about them. But most of these are connected with horrible and tragic occurrences—crimes, murders, solitary imprisonments, as if (supposing for a moment the things to be true) it were a punishment of some kind to have to return to the earth and to re-enact the scenes of desperation and wickedness. And even the unhappy victims of such outrages seem condemned to the same fate; as if the only motive force that could bring one back were fear and indelible horror, reconstructing incidents which one would give anything to forget, but cannot.

"If there were stories of spirits returning to earth to revive gratefully scenes of happiness and love, delightful experiences of youth and friendship and ingenuous aspiration, when the heart was full of hope and joy, it would be different; but no spirits ever seem to think of this. Are they ungrateful? Have they forgotten?"

"Religious people would perhaps say," I said, "that the happiness of the farther world was so great, that a blest spirit would never care to return to these half-lit skies, and to the memory of joys that were always shadowed by some fear of loss and separation."

"But this is an utterly selfish and indifferent business," said Bendyshe. "We should despise it in a living human being. And even



if it were so, have they no wish to comfort the hearts that ache with the memories of perished happiness? No; if the spirits of even the blest are so drugged and intoxicated with delight that they have a room for remembrance or tenderness, it is a more ghastly business still."

We sat for a little while in silence. "I expect it's about time to go to bed?" he said. "I ought not to go on soliloquising like this." He escorted me to my room, and said another friendly word about my visit, adding, "Breakfast at nine—please ask for anything you want. Hope you'll sleep well; and you will find some good bedside-books there if you want them."

I was soon in bed, and I fell asleep in a mood of pleasurable anticipation. This was going to be a novel experience, I felt sure, and Bendyshe's theories interested me; and almost immediately, so it seemed, I woke from a dreamless sleep, with old Bartlett the butler in my room, coughing deferentially, and asking if I would have a cup of tea, and whether I would have a hot or cold bath, and if there was anything else I required.

### 3

That morning at breakfast I found Bendyshe in a cheerful and eminently commonplace mood. He told me stories about the village and the people and the country-side. I asked some questions about one of the portraits, an old, rugged-looking man with prominent eyes and upstanding hair.

"*What the dickens!*" I call him," said Bendyshe, smiling. "But we'll leave all that to the Vicar, who is coming to dinner this evening—he knows far more about the house and the family than I do. He has been here thirty years—in fact his wife, now dead, was connected in some way with the Faulkners."

After breakfast I went off to do some writing, but I did very little, and my mind ran with curious persistency on what Bendyshe had told me on the previous night. He did not look like a man who had ever had a great shock or passed through tragic experiences; indeed, his preoccupation with psychical matters seemed to me still a little unaccountable, and inconsistent with the fact that he evidently lived a busy and active life, and took a considerable share in local business.

He came and fetched me out about noon, and we strolled to the church and village. He had a word for all the people he met; he called

the boys and girls by their Christian names; his hat went off to any woman. We met an old man hobbling along with two sticks.

"Why, Mr Barry," said Bendyshe, "I'm glad to see you about again. Feeling better? You look quite your old self again."

"Thank you kindly, sir—yes, I'm better, Mr Bendyshe, but feeling powerful giddy at times!"

"Ah, that'll soon pass off in the open air," said Bendyshe. "Now, shall I step in this evening for a bit of a gossip, Mr Barry? I always get the news of the place from you. Hartley, this is Mr Barry; I call him the father of the place. He will be a hundred and one years old in January next—isn't that so?"

Mr Barry chuckled. "Don't you believe Mr Bendyshe, sir," he said to me with a smile. "He will have his joke; 'tis only eighty-eight I am, last Febbery!"

So Bendyshe went on—but not for a moment did it seem an assumed heartiness, rather the natural overflowing of a neighbourly geniality; while a word of sympathy which he said to an old lady in rusty black was both tender and straightforward. With the children he was entirely delightful, with mysterious jests and allusions.

I said something about this. "Oh, yes," he said, "a child likes to share a secret with a grown-up person, a secret which no one else knows. I'm not sure we don't all like it," he added with a smile; "a secret's rather an explosive thing." We went to the church, a fine, ancient place which had evidently been carefully restored; one aisle was full of monuments to the Faulkner family, from a knight in armour in a canopied niche to a weeping nymph by Chantrey. "Fancy throwing away an inheritance like that," he said, as we looked at the old tombs; "but the whole history of the family is a steady process of climbing down. I'll show you the remains of their old mansion, about half a mile away, one of these days. The Vicar thinks it is the doom of sacrilege, but that's rather too business-like a view for me!"

I grew more astonished as the day went on to find the polite and solitary diner-out transformed here into so bustling and genial a squire. I could not fit the puzzle together; and still less did he seem to me a man who carried about, hidden in his mind, so strange and haunting an aspiration.

In the afternoon it was very hot; we went round the house and looked at the portraits. They were not particularly good, but the family likeness was strong; and the picture of the last of the Faulkner race, as a boy of sixteen, was a graceful and beautiful thing. It represented him in riding-dress standing beside a pony, slender, blue-eyed and light-haired, with a gentle, rather wistful expression. Next to the picture was one of his mother—a woman of rare beauty and charm—and

a rather commonplace portrait on the other side of his father, a burly country squire.

"It's all rather an enigma," said Bendyshe, looking thoughtfully at the portraits. 'Up till that time, you see, they had been very ordinary people, moderately prosperous, but not very successful, and quite unadventurous. There doesn't seem to have been a single instance of a man of any eminence among them, not even a soldier or a bishop. One of them was an M.P., but unseated for bribery. And then just when a strain of beauty comes into the family and a touch of romance, that minute the devil comes too. It looks as if there were something in the old idea of Nemesis, as if the way to be happy was not to attract the attention of the powers above. That pretty woman was an heiress, and the boy was born wealthy; and he was certainly charming, and I believe clever too—the Vicar shall tell us all about him this evening.'

I was somewhat struck by the interest which Bendyshe seemed to take in the old family. As a rule, the last thing that a new proprietor is interested in is the history of the family he has ousted. But Bendyshe seemed to wish to bring me into touch with the personalities of his predecessors, as though he desired me to draw some inference or to solve some problem. Indeed, when later in the afternoon he took me out and showed me the relics of the old Faulkner mansion, an octagonal turret and a crow-stepped gable, with a fine chimney-stack of moulded bricks, and a great dovecote, all forming part of a rather ram-shackle farm, I became even more sure of this, and commented on it. Bendyshe laughed a short laugh, as though partly pleased and partly disconcerted, and said, "Yes, don't you think it would all make rather a picturesque article?" adding with a smile, "You see, if I take you away from your work, I ought to give you some copy in exchange. But don't let me bore you. I am afraid it is rather a tiresome fancy of mine, to speculate about my predecessors.'

"Oh, I'm not bored," I said—"quite the reverse. What I feel is rather that you have some idea in your mind, which you want me to perceive for myself, and that you were, so to speak, inoculating me!" Bendyshe looked at me sharply, but I somehow saw that he was not displeased.

After tea I read and wrote a little in the library. I felt rather drowsy after a day in the open air, and fell asleep in my chair, but awakened suddenly with a start, and with a strong impression that someone had entered the room softly, and as softly withdrawn. I had, too, a sensation of something chilly in the air, and a faint earthy odour such as one connects with stone-built, underground, airless places. But it was all a momentary fancy; the flower-scented air was blowing in from the garden, and the bell of the church was ringing for Vespers. I got up and went out into the hall, and found Bendyshe with his

hat on just going out of the front-door. "Was it you who caught me napping just now?" I said.

Bendyshe gave me one of his quick glances, and said, "Well, I thought you might be having forty winks"—and then added, a little shamefacedly, "The fact is, I'm going to church—the Vicar is very good about services and doesn't get much of a congregation; besides, it makes me feel cosy, as Mrs Carlyle said of the glass of port. Do you care to come?"

"It isn't very much in my line," I said lightly, "but I'll come with pleasure—it's all part of the atmosphere; and besides, I shall get into the Vicar's good graces."

We sat in the chancel. There were only two other people present, both women. The Vicar, a big, sanguine-faced man with a fine head of silky white hair, read evening prayer with great rapidity but with extreme reverence; and I was pleased to see never once looked in our direction. His reading of the lessons was strangely impressive; the second lesson was a chapter from the Gospel. "*When the evil spirit is gone out of a man, he walketh through dry places, seeking rest, and finding none . . .*" He had lowered his voice, and read as though *it was a thing almost too terrible to be mentioned, except from a sense of duty*. Just before the end of the passage he shut his book and made a slight pause; and then, as though it was his own comment, looking round at us, he added, "So the last state of that man is worse than the first." And then he began the *Nunc Dimittis* in a tone of unmistakable relief.

When I got down before dinner, the Vicar and Bendyshe were sitting in the hall, talking in low tones. The Vicar got briskly up, and shook hands with me with great cordiality. His face was full of animation and benevolence. Bendyshe had said something to me about his being much of a mystic; but anything less mystical I had never seen. He was alive to the finger-tips. We had an amusing evening. The Vicar made a remarkably good meal, and told a few excellent stories of a local kind, crisply and shortly, in response to a direct request from Bendyshe. I indulged in some literary gossip, and the Vicar listened to stories about some of the well-known writers of the day with childish avidity and hearty laughter. "Excellent, excellent!" I remember his saying. "I have never been able to get on with his books—rather precious, I think?—but I'll give them another try; I didn't know the old man had so much blood in him!"

## 4

We settled ourselves after dinner in the smoking-room, and as soon as we were alone, Bendyshe said to the Vicar, "Now I want you to tell Hartley something about Hugh Faulkner"—adding to me, "that is the man whose portrait as a boy I showed you—and what happened when you came here. I always think it is an extraordinary story. Hartley won't make capital out of it, you know—he is quite discreet!"

"Well, then," said the Vicar, "I'll tell you. It was over thirty years ago that Hugh Faulkner—he was a distant cousin of my dear wife—offered me the living through his lawyer. I came down and looked round, but Mr Faulkner was ill, and I could not see him. I was just thirty then, and working in a quiet country curacy; and this gave me exactly what I wanted: more work, and a chance of really getting a hold on a place—and a beautiful church too—and I won't pretend that a larger income wasn't some inducement.

"Well, we settled here; and then bit by bit became aware that things were very wrong indeed in this house. Hugh Faulkner was about forty. His father and mother were both dead. He had been in the Guards, and he had done a good many wild things, and when at last he did something so outrageous that he was summarily told to send in his papers, he came down here. A less courageous man—he had plenty of courage—would have gone abroad for a bit, and waited for the thing to blow over. But he wasn't that sort. He came down here, and tried to brazen it out. But everyone knew about the scandal, and it was no use. People simply would not meet him, and were out when he called. He was cut and cold-shouldered everywhere. A few of the village people were civil to him; but he couldn't get servants, no one would accept his invitations. I've seen people in the street turn back rather than meet him. He stuck to it for weeks and months; and I tell you, Mr Hartley, my heart bled for that man, though one could neither like him nor trust him: but I couldn't help admiring him. He generally took no notice, but once or twice he lost his temper. I saw him with my own eyes stop and say something civil to a farmer—Pratt, by name—in the street, and the man pushed by: Faulkner went after him and screamed something into his ear—Pratt wasn't a very exemplary person, either—and the man went on white and shaking.

"One day he came to the Vicarage. I should say that I and my wife did see something of him; we went to dine there occasionally, but it was quite intolerable. He used to tell unpleasant stories, not anything to which you could take open exception, but one saw what he meant; and he had an old soldier-servant, a real ruffian, who used

to giggle at the sideboard. One day he had come in to tea at the Vicarage, and he looked tired to death. While we were at tea, a neighbouring parson and his wife called. I mentioned Faulkner's name; they made hasty excuses—they couldn't stay for tea—they had only looked in. They didn't say a word to Faulkner, who stood there with his tea-cup looking as if he was on fire within. Then he went up to the parson as he was leaving the room, and said to him in a low voice, 'So this is what you do for sinners, Mr Hale? What is your tone with the publicans?' What made it worse was that old Hale had the reputation of being rather too good a judge of wine.

"Then he said good-bye to us and marched out. I went back with him afterwards and did my best to talk to him. We parsons see some bad things, Mr Hartley, but I never had a worse hour. The man was possessed by devils, not by one only. He was not violent or obscene, he was simply desperate. And he told me, sitting in this very room, what some of his performances had been, and such a catalogue I never heard. However, that is all *sub sigillo*, you know. He said, I remember, that he had carefully considered whether he could have helped behaving so, and he had decided that he could not help it, and would do just the same again under the same conditions. 'You see, I didn't make myself,' he said.

"Then he went on to say that once he had left the army he had kept clear of it all, except in one respect; but that the more he put the pillow on his desires, the more they peeped round the corner of it. He was quoting Martin Chuzzlewit, I believe?—he was a great reader, I should say—and then he asked me to tell him plainly if I thought he had a chance of putting things straight—'I'm really rather a good-natured man,' he said, with a sort of pathos. 'I hardly expect to be liked—but I want to live on decent terms with my neighbours.' I said that it would take time, and it would depend on how he behaved—but that if he spoke to people as he had spoken to Hale at the Vicarage it was of no use expecting things to go better. 'But the man was damnably insolent!' he said, 'and I won't take that from anyone.'

"Well, we argued on, and then I tried to go a step farther—that's my trade, you know—and I wanted to see if the man felt any kind of regret for any of the things he had done. He was quieter by that time, but he told me plainly to remember that I was not in my Sunday school. I nearly lost my temper at that, but I saw that it wouldn't do to back out. So I said that I was there to help him if I could, but that I could do nothing unless I knew more or less what his feeling was. 'It's like calling in a doctor,' I said, 'and then keeping back some of your symptoms.'

"And then, Mr Hartley, I had a look for the first and last time of my life into the soul of a very bad man. He told me that he regretted it, in a way, because he didn't like the consequences. But that if there were no consequences, he would not even regret it. One phrase of his I remember, 'Why, I think no more of doing this and that than you think about taking a cup of tea!' He went on to say that when certain temptations came to him, he had no choice-'I really don't think I am quite responsible,' he said; 'there is nothing in my mind that even wishes to resist.' And as to feeling the need of forgiveness either from the people he had wronged or Almighty God, the idea seemed simply laughable to him; and I will only say this, that for the first and only time in my life I felt like doubting the power of God. And then at last I got away. I may add that for a month or two afterwards I was really ill. I could not sleep; I could not get the man's face out of my mind.

"And then there came a worse complication. Pratt, the farmer to whom Faulkner had spoken in the street, had an accident and was thrown out of his dog-cart; and Hale had a sort of stroke and was ill for some time. And this I think made matters hopeless. You know what sort of things people say, and underneath all our civilization there's a great deal of the ugliest old superstition left.

"After that Faulkner shut himself up altogether, except that he would ride or walk in the early summer mornings before people were about. In winter he hardly ever left the house; and what went on here I don't know-I don't like to think. He read a great deal, he did some gardening. I went to see him from time to time, but he would never talk freely again. He used to ask a few questions, and sometimes told me stories about his boyhood, things his mother had said to him-he had a curious kind of affection for her-the tricks he had played on his father; he seemed to me like a man in a dream. He also took to speculating on the Stock Exchange, and lost a lot of money. The only person who stuck to him was the old soldier-servant. They lived in three or four rooms, did their own cooking, smoked and drank together, and the house got into a filthy state. But nothing happened: he didn't die, he was never ill, he simply lived on. Once or twice old friends came to see him; and I remember one man-a retired Colonel, I believe-whom I met, leaving the house in haste, looking very much perturbed. He came up and spoke to me, said he had been to see his old friend Faulkner-they had been subalterns together-and he had been very much shocked, 'though I'm not very particular,' he added. Then he suddenly said, 'Tell me, is he mad?' 'Not in the least,' I said. 'Then, good God,' said the Colonel, 'why doesn't the man shoot himself?'-and he went off straight to the station.

"Now, for more than ten years things went on—think what that means—the garden was all overgrown with bushes and brambles, with a path through to a plot where they grew vegetables; and in front the shrubs grew over the lower windows, and most of the upper windows were broken. But it shows what a strange thing human nature is, Mr Hartley, for I believe the people here were rather proud of it than other-wise, though there was once an ugly demonstration. The old soldier-servant used to be seen about—he did the shopping, and he was rather a feature of the place. And strange to say, I got rather to like the man. He had been a real ruffian, I expect, but the way that man stuck to poor Hugh—it was heroic. There was nothing he wouldn't have done for him, and he simply worshipped him. I used to wonder what would happen to Hugh if he died.

"I still went in at times to see Hugh, and I believe he was glad to see me, though when he was in a bad mood he used to ask me all kinds of ingenious and bewildering questions about religious matters which I could not answer; but as a rule I don't think he was even very consciously unhappy. They lived by a routine, and Hugh used to talk mysteriously of his experiments—I never quite knew what he meant, but nothing very good, I fear. And then there were stories—at one time the garden was thought to be full of great black birds; and at another there were supposed to be creatures which grunted and snorted about among the bushes, and screamed out sharply at night. There were said to be curious mounds in the garden, like earth thrown out from burrows. Sometimes the windows were lighted up, and music was heard; and a man was said to have been seen going up the wall at the back like a fly. But I never saw anything myself, except for the fact that the house seemed to me sometimes to be full of smells—bitter, suffocating smells, like nothing on earth; and at times appeared full of shadows, gliding blacknesses, like mist or smoke. But I daresay all these things had some explanation."

"But I must bring my story to an end—and I must add that though I never quite gave up trying to get hold of something in Hugh's mind and heart that I could pull on, and though I said many prayers for him, it all was a total failure; but I somehow became aware of a change of atmosphere about the house, about Hugh himself. I had generally had the feeling as if some struggle was going on somewhere out of sight, or even as though one were watched by something that would like to make a spring if it dared. Hugh himself was less violent and quieter; it seemed like exhaustion.

"One night, about the end of April (I was alone then, for my dear wife had died the year before; and I must tell you that in one of the last talks we had, she said to me, "Don't give Hugh up—I think there



is something coming to him," but she could not explain), I was working late when I heard someone tapping at the door, quietly and insistently; and I found it was Hugh's servant. He wanted me to come and see Hugh at once. 'Did he send for me?' I said. 'No, sir—but I'm frightened about him. He doesn't eat, he doesn't sleep—he sits watching something.' The man kept moistening his lips as he spoke and then broke out, 'Come and see if you can help him.'

"I went off at once; and when we got into the house I knew that there was something very wrong indeed. There was a silence that appalled me—I have never experienced such a silence; and though it was a warm night, the house was deadly cold. But worse still, there seemed something holding us back which required pushing into. I fought my way upstairs; but the old servant gave up, sat down on the bottom step and watched me. There was one solitary candle in the hall, which flickered and cast hideous shadows.

"I went straight into Hugh's room—the room at the top of the stairs. I found him stretched fully dressed upon his bed, his eyes closed, and making motions with his hands as if he were trying to thrust something away. His brow was horribly puckered and his face seemed swollen and congested. I went up and took his hand, and he gave a kind of moan or wail—the sort of cry a hare gives when a keeper takes hold of it. 'Don't be afraid,' I said; 'it's only me. John, you know!' At this he sat up and opened his eyes. 'The dream,' he said, 'the dream—it's closing in on me!' Then he said to me in a faint voice, 'Surely it's enough?—it's all empty and dark—it's draining my life away!' Then he turned to me and said, 'Where have I been?' I knew well enough. It isn't only a name, Mr Hartley, it's a very real thing—the most real thing but one in the world. Then he said to me, 'Fifteen years of hell, John—does anything deserve that?' I hardly knew what I was saying then, for the cold that I had felt on the stairs was gathering in, thicker than ever. But I said—the words were given me somehow, 'Perhaps you have done your punishment, Hugh; it's over and I done.' He shook his head and lay down again; and I just knelt down and said the last prayers, and in the middle he gave one shudder, which went through him from head to foot, and I knew he was gone.

"Yes, I know what you would like to ask me, Mr Hartley, and my answer is that I don't know." He was gone, but something else was gone too. The servant came running up the stairs, and looked in. I beckoned to him. He came and knelt down by me, and I finished the prayers; and when I had finished, he took my hand and pressed it; and then he took Hugh in his arms and stroked his face. I left them there, and went away a wiser man, I hope.

"The family lawyer came down, and he and I made a search for documents to no purpose. He had kept some papers in a despatch-box that was always near him; but this was missing, and could not be found. There was nothing to throw light on the matter, except that the servant said that he had lately been strange in manner and apathetic, and that he had lost his appetite; and I will only add that there was an inquest. I told my tale with reservations, and they called it natural death. I didn't hesitate to bury him in the churchyard, and there he lies; but no one came to the funeral. And the Bishop sent for me to enquire into the circumstances; but when I had finished the story, as much as it was fit for a Bishop to hear, he told me frankly that he had meant to suggest to me to resign my living, but that now he had altered his mind, and that I must on no account leave the place. I never saw a man in such a state of what we will call godly embarrassment. And the next Sunday I made my flock a little sermon on 'Judge not, that ye be not judged,' and gave them a bit of my mind. And, strange to say, I have never had any trouble to speak of since."

The Vicar made a long pause, and shook his head. I could see that there was something further in his mind which he had decided not to mention. I confess that this strange and tragic story produced an extraordinary effect upon me. For one thing, it was all so darkly mysterious, so full of unexplained hints and suggestions of evil, that it aroused in me a vague terror which made me wish that I had never listened to it. Not so Bendyshe; he was sitting back in his chair, his hands clasped together, looking at the Vicar with gleaming eyes, like a man on the brink of a great discovery.

Then the Vicar turned to me, and said, "There, Mr Hartley, I have told you the story at Mr Bendyshe's request. You may be thinking that it is the sort of tale that had better not be told, and that such a collection of shocking incidents is better forgotten and buried in oblivion. But I have two reasons for telling you. In the first place, the outline of the story, only greatly exaggerated, is known to and repeated by a good many people in this place, and I should wish you to have a more accurate version of what happened—anything is better than secrecy about such things; and Mr Bendyshe tells me he has a special reason for asking me to relate it to you, which you no doubt know, and of which I approve. I think it ought to be seriously investigated."

"And then, too, I have a further reason. There are very dark corners in this world of ours, and facts of our existence, which seem inconsistent with any faith in a beneficent and Almighty Creator; and I don't think it right to ignore them. My own belief—I will speak

frankly—is that God is slowly and patiently making a conquest of a world in which there exists—how originated I cannot even guess—a strong element of something atrocious and horrible, which defies Him, and seizes every opportunity of undoing His work. And to my mind, the horror of this story is that it seems like a deliberate attempt to focus this evil power, an attempt which failed, because this malignant influence, as I interpret it, is essentially what is called stupid. It has no principle; it works at details with a laborious persistency—that is where its essential weakness lies; but it ought not to be ignored; it must be met by anyone who comes across it with courage and intelligence. I don't think that Hugh Faulkner did any very serious or deep-seated harm here, and he certainly did not succeed in making evil attractive. He may have struck a blow at individuals, and I believe that he certainly did—but that is all."

"And now I must ask you to excuse me, if I say good night. May I have the pleasure of seeing you at the Vicarage, Mr Hartley? You may have some questions to ask about what I have told you. But I have nothing to add, and I may not be in a position to give you an answer."

The Vicar took his leave, and left on my mind the impression of great simplicity and goodness. He and Bendyshe went to the door together, and stood talking for some little time in low tones.

When Bendyshe came back, he said to me with a curious look, "Now what do you think of all that?"

"I don't know what to make of it," I said—"at present I'm simply rather stupefied. One goes along making the best of life and thinking the world on the whole a satisfactory and whole-some place; and then comes a tale like this, and one wonders if one has any real idea of what is going on, or of what may be hidden away in the minds of men and women. I wish I had never heard the story."

"Oh, come," said Bendyshe, "don't say that—it seems to me to have all the elements of a big adventure. I would give anything to get a little more information; but here one only gets the wildest and silliest gossip. I may tell you that I have tried to get on the track of Faulkner's servant, but I can't find a trace of him."

"I expect he is dead by this time," I said.

"No," said Bendyshe: "he is not dead. I can say that quite confidently—I have my reasons."

We sat for some little time together, and I asked Bendyshe one or two disjointed questions. I said, "There was one point in what the Vicar said which I did not quite understand. He spoke of Faulkner doing harm to individuals. What did he mean by that?"

"Well," said Bendyshe, "he meant Hale and Farmer Pratt in the

first place; and there are some other cases too, if you care to hear them."

"No, I don't want to hear them," I said; "but tell me this. Do you, and does the Vicar, really believe that Faulkner had the power of inflicting bodily damage upon these unfortunate men, without using some known human agency? Of course it might be that some mental shock and physical deterioration followed from a fright which—"

But Bendyshe interrupted me. "Do I believe it?" he said. "Why, I *know* it. Faulkner was just as much responsible for their illness as if he had fired a gun at them."

"But how is it possible?" I said.

"Ah, I don't know that," said Bendyshe; "but that he had the power of doing that sort of thing—at all events in the case, let us say, of people whose moral force was weakened by some indulgence—is incontestable. He didn't use it often, I admit; he was afraid to do so; but in both of these cases, and in others which I could tell, he lost all control of himself, and I believe that he let loose against them an undiluted current of evil; and the Vicar believes it too."

"But it isn't rational," I said; "we don't believe in witchcraft in the twentieth century."

"Perhaps it would be better if we did," said Bendyshe grimly. "We can't get rid of facts by calling them irrational."

I saw that he was getting nettled by the discussion, so I said, "Well, I must have time to let all this settle down."

In a moment the other Bendyshe appeared. "Yes," he said; "we mustn't let this visit of yours degenerate into a series of shocks and explosions. I've no right to do that, and if you give me a hint, I will drop my theory for a bit. But I very much hope you will help me to look into the matter. We'll have an easy day tomorrow."

He accompanied me to my room and said, "I hope the story tonight hasn't made you nervous? Perhaps this will reassure you." He showed me, let in beneath the dado-cornice, in the corner by my bed, a little circle looking like the top of a wooden peg, and painted white like the rest of the room. "That's a fancy of mine. My butler, Bartlett, doesn't sleep in the house—he has a house in the village. And this bell rings in my room—both the other spare bedrooms have it. I put it up when old Ford was staying here, and was taken ill in the night and couldn't make anyone hear. If you press on that, I'll be with you in a minute. I'm a very light sleeper!"

"Oh, I'm not nervous," I said. "I'm a sound sleeper, and then I'm a rational man."

Bendyshe smiled at this and said, "Yes; that's just why I want your help. Good night, old man."

## 5

Left to myself that night, I went slowly and deliberately to bed. I felt curiously tired and drowsy after the cataract of varied impressions which I had received during the day; and I was conscious, too, of a growing excitement. The Vicar's story had done more to arouse this than any of Bendyshe's semi-scientific theories. The Vicar, I felt, was a man without an axe to grind, and with a certain duty to perform in the world, a desire to illumine the darkness, to extinguish evil. He did not turn his back upon it or ignore it, and his aim was a practical one. Bendyshe, on the other hand, was like a man engaged in research; he simply wanted to arrive at facts. Indeed, there had been moments in the day when I had suspected him of being something very monomaniac; but his friendliness was engaging, and the appeal he had made to me for help had touched me. But help in what? That I could not say.

Just, I imagine, before I slept, I had a curious sensation of something vague and restless in the house, something that faintly jarred my drowsy nerves; it was all a fancy, but I thought dimly that someone, sleeplessly and wearily, was engaged in pacing about, and searching for a thing both secret and momentous, which had been mislaid or hidden. I wondered vaguely if the inquisitive brain of Bendyshe, weighing, considering, discriminating, was having a sort of telepathic effect on my own. The house was absolutely still; the church clock struck two with a murmur sweet as honey; and then, curiously enough, I had a sensation of great mental ease. If anything was going forward, I was at least in no way concerned in it; the searcher did not wish me ill—my presence there was nothing to him. And then, I suppose, I passed into sleep.

While I dressed in the morning, I could see Bendyshe pacing in the narrow strip of garden that lay beneath my windows, lost in thought. He greeted me when I came downstairs with much effusion. "Slept well?" he said. "That's right. You look very fit and spry. We'll have a good spin today—we might go to Canterbury perhaps?" And yet, strange to say, I had an indefinable sense that Bendyshe was in some way disappointed.

Our run was uneventful enough. Bendyshe made no allusion to the narrative of the previous evening. I thought, indeed, that he was a little conscience-stricken for having plunged me, so to speak, up to the neck in these dark matters. In fact I do not think he had intended to do so, but his own overpowering interest, in the company of someone whom he thought sympathetic, had run away with

him. I felt in a singularly placid mood, and the summer fields, the woodland corners, the hop-gardens, the hamlets through which we went, worked upon me like some gentle anodyne. We ate our luncheon on the shoulder of a high, upstanding ridge along which the road passed; and I was amazed at Bendyshe's knowledge of the country. There was hardly a church-tower visible that he could not name, and he was full of local and personal anecdotes which beguiled the time very pleasantly.

We got back for tea, and I then experienced something of a reaction. In spite of the beauty and comfort of the house, there came on me a sense of lurking dreariness which I could not analyse; something was going on there, in the cool rooms, the panelled corridors, which I could not penetrate. I tried to work, I tried to read—Bendyshe had gone off to the village on some friendly errand—and I became aware that I did not wish to be alone. When the dressing-gong sounded, I felt a strong disinclination to leave the room.

Ten minutes later I heard the front door open. Bendyshe's brisk stride was audible in the hall. This was a relief to me; but instead of coming, as I had expected, to the library, he went quickly upstairs. I decided that I must go too; but just as I got to the head of the stairs, I became aware that someone was coming down the corridor as if from Bendyshe's room. It was beginning to be dusk, and I could not see the figure very plainly. It was a man, carelessly dressed in an old grey suit of clothes, shuffling along very noiselessly, his head hanging down, with a markedly sullen and dejected air. The face looked healthy but careworn, and it came into my mind that it was some petitioner who had come to make a request of Bendyshe, but who had been decisively and perhaps unceremoniously refused. I said "Good evening" to the man as he passed me, and then I had a real surprise of rather an unpleasant kind, for he took not the slightest notice of me or my salutation, as if he neither heard nor saw me; he shuffled on down the corridor and was swallowed up in the shadow at the head of the stairs. Yet it did not seem to me an intentional rudeness, but rather as if the stranger's preoccupation was so intense that there was no room in his mind for any other impression.

I went and dressed and was downstairs in the smoking-room when Bendyshe appeared. "You've had a busy evening," I said. "And I saw you got caught by a caller on coming in."

Bendyshe looked at me quickly and interrogatively. "Oh, yes," he said, "I have endless visitors—there's nothing I'm not asked to do."

"But I expect you can't always do it," I said. "I passed your friend in the corridor, and I never saw disappointment so legibly written on anyone's face as on his—he hadn't even time to exchange civilities!"

"You spoke to him?" said Bendyshe, adding, "Poor chap, yes, he has no end of troubles. But what the real trouble is I don't quite know. So he struck you as disappointed, did he?"

"Yes, indeed," I said. "I almost wonder that you had the heart to refuse him. He looked quite worn out, and took no notice whatever of me. I should like to know his history."

Bendyshe stared at me in silence, and it struck me that I had been impertinent. "I'm sorry," I said, "if I have been too inquisitive."

"Good Lord, it isn't that," said Bendyshe; "but the man doesn't know what he wants, or at least I don't know what he wants—I can't make out, and that's just the difficulty. And when I find out, then—well, then I shall know what to do."

Bendyshe was in a very strange mood that evening—so strange that I more than once thought that my half-formed conjecture of the previous night was true. He seemed to be wrestling against the approach of a secret and triumphant mirth. Our talk turned on the ailments of middle-age, and I confessed to being conscious of the necessity of a régime. "I don't believe in taking care of oneself," he said—"plenty of air, enough exercise, variety, work, plenty of other people's business, not too much eating and drinking and smoking; and most of all, if you think you can't do a particular thing or don't want to, go and do it!"

"That's rather Spartan," I said.

"No," said Bendyshe; "it's simply this—we have all of us got three at least, or even more, people inside us. There's the one that admires and enjoys—he's all right. Then there's the one that criticizes and reflects. Then there's the animal, which needs to be sensibly and good-humouredly drilled, like a dog or horse, and he's a patient and serviceable fellow enough. But behind them all, in the little innermost room, there's the one that fears, and he mustn't be listened to for a single instant, or he will run the whole show."

"I never thought of it like that," said I; "yet I'm sure you are right. But which is the one that *wills*?"

"Oh, they all do that," said Bendyshe, laughing; "it's a kind of board. The point is that the right man should have the casting vote." And then he was again overtaken by his tendency to laughter, and laughed unreservedly. I suppose that he detected some annoyance in my face, for he suddenly stopped. "Forgive me," he said; "I have a fit of the giggles sometimes, and it is bad manners. But I have been lucky today. I have made some progress—more than I expected."

After dinner we had a game of piquet, and went up to bed about midnight. As we came out at the head of the stairs, Bendyshe said, "Was it here you met my poor friend? Which way did he go?"

"Down the stairs," said I; "but I lost sight of him."

"Ah, he ought to have gone down the backstairs," said Bendyshe, "but I suppose he forgot. Hullo, what's this?" He turned sharply round. The door leading into the unfurnished bedroom was open, and the moon shone in, showing the boarded floor and the clean-cut panelling. "Who the devil did that?" said Bendyshe very irritably. "Here, come in—let's have a look. Has there been someone prowling about, I wonder?" He led the way into the room, but I felt an insupportable reluctance to enter it. "I must have this place locked up," said Bendyshe, half to himself, "Hullo, this is all quite new."

I followed him into the room, suddenly feeling the need of company. He was bending down, looking at something on the floor. "The wet must have got through," said Bendyshe to himself. I drew nearer, and saw that a quantity of plaster had fallen from the ceiling; up above an irregular square opening appeared; but what, I confess, gave me a shudder of dismay was that the plaster on the floor had a strange resemblance to the shape of a prostrate figure. I saw at once that it was a merely accidental likeness, and even as I looked Bendyshe with his foot swept the *débris* together.

He took me to my room and said a few friendly words. I saw that he wished to obliterate the impression caused by his merriment. I went to bed, and, contrary to all my expectations, for the evening had been an agitating one, I slept profoundly. But before I slept, I half determined that I would not prolong my stay. Bendyshe was behaving very oddly; but then I thought of the Vicar, and I decided that as he had asked me to his house, I would go and consult him; and this brought me a sense of relief.

## 6

The morning turned out insufferably hot. Bendyshe was very cheerful and pleasant at breakfast. He said he had directed that some chairs should be taken out into the shade of the sycamores. "The verandah is a bit stuffy," he said, "when the wind is in the north." He had got down a parcel of books from town, new books which he thought might interest me. And when we went out there was a table, and two chairs, and an irresistible heap of neat volumes of all shapes and sizes. We sat mostly in silence; occasionally Bendyshe went off to the house, and twice at least he was summoned by the butler to see a caller. "I lead a dog's life," he said, laughing—"plenty of fleas!"



I had again become immersed in my book, when a sudden exclamation from Bendyshe, betraying a poignant and acute emotion, made me look up. He was leaning forwards, his gaze bent on the front of the house. At the closed window of the unfurnished bedroom, plainly visible, and indeed made curiously luminous by the sunlight, a man was standing looking out into the garden. He was, so far as I could judge, an elderly man, with a shock of grey hair, and a curiously blurred and puffy face, red and bloated. He was dressed in a sort of apron, dirty white, showing arms bare to the elbow. "Who's that? What's that?" said Bendyshe in indescribable agitation. It seemed to me so unnecessary and unaccountable an excitement, that I said, "Well, if you ask me, I should say it was the plasterer come to repair the ceiling."

"You're right—you're right," said Bendyshe, with a gesture of intense relief. "Of course, I forgot—I mentioned it to Bartlett—but I didn't expect him today. I imagined—well, I don't know what I did imagine." He got up from his chair and went hurriedly to the house.

I was by this time very seriously perturbed indeed about Bendyshe, and began to believe that he was on the brink of insanity. It rushed into my mind that I would go to the Vicarage at once. I went back to the house, where all was silent. Old Bartlett was laying the table in the dining room. I said to him, "If Mr Bendyshe asks for me, will you tell him I have just gone into the village, but shall be back in a few minutes?"

He was a comfortable and amiable old fellow. "Certainly, sir," he said; "but it's a terrible hot day for the street—you'll wear your straw, no doubt, sir," and he bustled out to open the door for me.

I arrived at the Vicarage—an old substantial house, behind the church—and was shown straight into the study. The Vicar greeted me very warmly. "Yes, I had hoped I might see you, Mr Hartley," he said. "I'm afraid you think you have got into a very strange place here, and I'm not surprised at your coming."

I sat down and told him the incidents of the morning and the previous day. He listened to me very gravely. Then he said: "I can't cast any light, I fear, on what has been happening—indeed, I am under a promise to Mr Bendyshe not to do so. But the important point is this. You may be absolutely and entirely reassured about his sanity. He is as sane as you are, and a great deal more sane than I am. He is the hardest-headed man I know. Mr Hartley, I can tell you that that man has gone through experiences which would have sent nine out of ten men crazy. And he is a man of great emotional sensibility too, but he has got infinite courage and inflexible purpose. I cannot tell you how I admire and reverence him. But I must add this:

Bendyshe wants your help very much. It is worth your while to give it to him, and I think that, so far as I can judge from our short acquaintance, he has made a remarkably shrewd choice. But if, on the other hand, you feel in any way alarmed or repelled by the claim, I will go over to the Manor-house with you, and insist on your being released from any obligation—and he will take my advice.”

“No,” I said; “once really assured of Bendyshe’s sanity, I have no wish to be released. He shall have whatever help I can give him, for as long as I can give it—but I confess I do not quite trust myself.”

“Mr Hartley,” said the Vicar, “you have chosen the right course, and I am infinitely relieved; and I may add this, that the results may turn out to be of the utmost importance. Please consult me at any time.”

Just as I was going, the Vicar said, “Would it be troublesome if I asked you to take a note for me to Bendyshe? I will come round at 2.30 to speak to him about it; but I think he ought to have this news at once.”

The Vicar scribbled a few words on a sheet of writing-paper, enclosed in it an open telegram which was lying on the table, sealed and addressed an envelope, and handed it to me.

I returned to find luncheon ready and Bendyshe pacing in the hall, evidently in a state of great suppressed excitement. I handed him the note and gave him the Vicar’s message. He tore the envelope open, read the enclosure, and a cry of surprise not unmixed with a deep satisfaction escaped from his lips. I thought for a moment that he was going to hand it to me; but he did not, and presently replaced it carefully in the envelope. Then he looked at me, rather a grim and searching look. “So you went round to see the Vicar?” he said. “May I ask what you went to talk about?”

“Yes, certainly,” I replied. “I was beginning to feel this morning that I was getting too deep into a rather mysterious business; and I don’t feel very sure of myself. You must remember how new and unfamiliar this all is to me—how little, in fact, I know of you beyond a mere acquaintanceship, to speak plainly; and I felt the other night that the Vicar was a man I could trust, so I went round to ask him a few questions.”

Bendyshe put down his knife and fork and drummed with his fingers on the table. “Well,” he said in rather a grim tone, “what’s the result?”

“He seemed to think,” I said, “that you needed my assistance, and he was very insistent that I should give it, if I felt able to do so. And the long and short of it is that I decided to do so.”

Bendyshe’s face lit up with a smile; he held out his hand to me,

and I grasped it, feeling that some compact of a momentous kind was being made. "Well, old man," he added in a tone which showed that he was deeply moved, "I can only say that I am truly grateful and thankful. It's a big business, and I want someone at hand whom I can trust, very badly indeed. Mind," he added, "I'm not afraid of anything that may happen—but I want a perfectly fair-minded man, who isn't afraid either, and that's what I feel you are. Now," he went on, "I'll have no secrets from you. Ask me any questions, and I'll answer them."

"No," I said, "I won't ask for that. I know that you want an impartial observer. I can see that something very queer is going on in this house, but I won't ask questions; I'll draw my own conclusions, and then when you think it best you shall tell me."

"That's right," said Bendyshe, "just what I want, and that's a bargain. If you will keep your ears and eyes open, it's all I ask. You may be surprised—you may even be shocked; but I can assure you that there is nothing to be afraid of—nothing whatever. We will just go our own way for a bit, and see how things turns out. Now, this letter," he went on, slapping his pocket, "is the most important thing that has happened yet. Perhaps you will see the Vicar when he comes up, and tell him anything you have noticed, anything in the smallest degree unusual; and then leave us to discuss it—and thank you once again."

While we were smoking, the Vicar arrived, and I saw that he looked perturbed. I left the two alone together, and half an hour later Bendyshe came to the library, and said that the Vicar and himself were obliged, owing to the news received, to go away on the following day.

"We shall leave immediately after breakfast in my car," he said, "and we shall be back for dinner, unless anything unforeseen occurs. It's very inhospitable, I know," he added, "and I don't feel sure if you will care to be so long alone. Have you anything in town that you want to do? Or you could easily spend the day at the Vicarage—that could be arranged. I'm afraid it is absolutely imperative for us to go."

"Oh, don't bother about me," I said. "I will do what I am very fond of doing—go out for a long vague walk, get some food at a village inn, and be back in good time in the evening. It will do me good; and I can think over things a bit."

"It's very good of you," said Bendyshe, looking decidedly relieved.

The rest of the day passed quietly enough. We sat in the garden, and the only event that struck me was that one of the gardeners and the chauffeur, in the course of the afternoon, brought a ladder across

the lawn and got it into the house with some difficulty.

Bendyshe was thoughtful and cheerful. We played a game after dinner, and he proposed an early adjournment.

I was glad to go to bed—the day had been one of some agitation. But when I had got to bed I could not sleep. I was seized with a kind of detective fever, and found myself speculating as to what the whole mystery could be. I did not believe very firmly in its supernatural character, and as for the occult side of it all, I may say I was frankly sceptical. It seemed to me that the Vicar and Bendyshe were probably affected by the tragic fate of Faulkner, and were perhaps inclined to attribute significance to circumstances of no great importance, but there were evidently things which had yet to be told me. While I was pursuing this train of thought—it was now nearly one—I distinctly heard soft footsteps in the corridor. I went to the door, opened it very quietly, and looked out. I saw Bendyshe, in his shirt and trousers, carrying in his hand a lantern, walking very gently, his back to me, towards the staircase. He came to the door of the unfurnished room, drew a key from his pocket, unlocked the door, and went in, closing it with great precaution. I had a strong impulse to follow him, but thought that he might be annoyed at my intrusion; so I left my door half-open, and feeling restless and anxious, I put on some clothes, sat down in an arm-chair near the door, prepared to rise and close it the moment I heard the door of the unfurnished room open. I will admit that I was far from easy in my mind about this solitary exploration, but I had by this time a robust confidence in Bendyshe's strength of will. For a time I heard nothing; but then I began to perceive very faint muffled sounds overhead, as though Bendyshe (I supposed) was moving about slowly and cautiously, and perhaps searching for something that was not easily to be discovered—for there were long pauses between the sounds, as if the searcher were standing still.

I suddenly perceived what was happening. The ladder had no doubt been brought upstairs and put in the unfurnished room. Bendyshe was certainly using it to obtain access through the hole in the ceiling to some room or loft overhead, and was quietly investigating it at night, so as to be secure against interruption. I confess that the nerve which would be required for such a proceeding fairly amazed me, particularly when I thought of the supernatural influences Bendyshe clearly believed to be at work in the house.

I suppose that half an hour had passed thus, when suddenly I became aware that a very alarming interruption had happened overhead. Heavy footsteps stamped and rushed in the loft above me, then grew fainter, and then I heard the sound of a fall and a half-stifled cry from the direction of the unfurnished room. I rose and

hurried down the corridor, flung open the door of the room and saw a sight which horrified me. The moonlight streamed in at the open window. Bendyshe was sitting on the ground with his hands clasped on his forehead; beside him lay the extinguished lantern.

"What has happened, Bendyshe?" I said, hastening to his side. He unclasped his hands and looked at me, and I could see that blood was flowing on to his shirt.

"I have had an accident, old man," said Bendyshe in rather a husky tone, "but I'm not much the worse, I think. No, don't ask questions—just help me up." I held out a hand and lifted him to his feet. He looked dizzily round. "Good God, what a fool I was!" he said. "I might have known it wouldn't do—here, Hartley, pick up that lantern, there's a good fellow, and come to my room with me. I don't think I'm much amiss, after all. I only hope to God that no one else heard. How did you know I was here? You came like lightning."

"I saw you go in here," I said, "and I heard you overhead—and I had a feeling that I might be wanted."

We went into the passage; I passed my arm through his, and he seemed glad of the support. He turned on the electric light in his room and I followed him into the bathroom. He was very pale, his hair disordered; the wound turned out to be at the base of his throat, a scratch or cut, torn and lacerated. He bathed it, and it proved not to be very deep. "I must have caught my neck on the broken edges of some of the laths," he said. "Well, I'm thankful it's no worse." He came back into his bedroom, and opened a small case which I saw contained some surgical appliances. He soaked a bit of cotton-wool in some disinfectant; and very deftly wrapped a bandage round his neck and under his arms, only asking me to fasten it for him. Then he dropped some liquid into a glass and swallowed it. "Now, old man," he said, "you get to bed and let me have a sleep. I have got a long day tomorrow."

"But you won't go in this condition?" I said.

"Yes, I must go," he said, "but Elton will drive. I shall be all right. I have just had a bit of a shock—I slipped on the ladder, you see, and I'm only thankful I didn't break a limb. Now go and get some sleep yourself," he added—"you look as if you wanted it; and mind, don't be *excited*! Nothing more will happen tonight, you may be sure of that—I've had a lesson, anyhow!"

And so I left him, but lay long awake, pondering and speculating what had Bendyshe expected to find in the loft; and what had he found or seen that caused him to beat so hasty a retreat. For I knew enough of Bendyshe by this time to know that it must have been something of a very alarming or startling kind to upset him so.

## I

I was relieved to find in the morning that Bendyshe showed few signs of the adventure of the previous day. The man was as tough as steel! He limped a little, and the wound in his neck was stiff and uncomfortable; but he was cheerful, not with any assumed cheerfulness, but with the tranquil assurance of the soldier who has come out unexpectedly well from a dangerous affray. I saw that the element of danger, whatever it was, about the whole investigation was a stimulus to him rather than the reverse.

It was a fine cool day, and the Vicar and he started about ten o'clock. It was a four-hour drive, Bendyshe told me, and they hoped to be back at seven. "If we are delayed," he said, "we will wire at once; and if you then don't care about staying here alone, the Vicar has arranged for his housekeeper to give you a cold supper at the Vicarage." I wrote a letter or two, and telling Bartlett that I should be out for luncheon and probably for tea as well, I went off soon after eleven.

It was astonishing to find how much more cheerful and light-hearted I became on getting clear of the house. I had hardly realized how much the atmosphere of the place was weighing on my spirits. It was not what had actually occurred, for that was trivial enough. It was a feeling of suspense, of hardly knowing from hour to hour what might not happen.

I walked off into the country, delighting in the freshness of the green lanes, the views from higher ground, the pleasant villages and farms I passed through. I got some bread and cheese at an inn. The landlord was a chatty old man, amiably inquisitive. He asked where I had come from, and when I said from Hebden Hill, he brightened up. He knew Hebden well, it seemed, and had some relations living there. Then he asked me if I knew the Manor-house. "You mean the big house opposite the west end of the church?" I said.

"That's it, sir," he said. "Did you ever hear tell of Squire Faulkner?" he went on.

"Yes," I said, "I have heard the name—I think the Vicar mentioned it."

"Ah! that would be Mr Fortescue," he said. "I knew him when I was a young man." Then he went on in a rambling way, telling me about the Squire. "They did say he done a murder, or next door to it, and he come out of the army, and he lived all alone at the Manor with an old soldier as had been in his regiment for his servant, and they carried on dreadful. People used to say that they cooked the mice

and rats and ate them, and the drink going from morning to night. But there were worse stories than that, sir," the old man went on, dropping his voice. "Folk said the Squire had sold himself to you know who, sir, that ain't the one above—and that don't seem hardly worth while, do it? And if the Squire had an ill-will to anyone, he could bring all sorts of mischief to pass. I don't know rightly about it, sir, but it wasn't thought hardly safe to cross the Squire, and they used to say that the two would catch a cat, as it might be, and burn it alive, and then it would be like poison to the man the Squire had an ill-will to."

"And there was one bad story about a poor girl—a pretty girl she was, Annie Rogers by name, who lived with her mother that was a widow, and had a little money of her own. The old sergeant, it seems, took a fancy to her, and wanted her to marry him, but she couldn't abide the sight of him. That was hard enough, but then the Squire got wind of it, and thought that if the sergeant married her, he would lose his servant. And they had very high words about it, it was said. But the Squire went secret to work, and first old Mrs Rogers lost her bit of money and had to go out for jobs; and then she died; and Mr Fortescue was very good to Annie, and took her as a servant—but she was afraid of meeting the sergeant about the place; and one day the Vicar found him at the back door, speaking to Annie and frightening the girl with some nonsense; and the Vicar ordered him off, and the sergeant swore and that, and the Vicar went after him to the gate. There were some people passing by who stopped to look on; and the Vicar kept quite cool, and said to the sergeant in a loud voice that he was going to say before them all what he thought of him; and he said he was a dangerous and drunken ruffian—those were his words—and that if he ever annoyed the girl again, he would have him up before the magistrates and they would put him where he would have to hold his tongue."

"The sergeant kept quiet after that for a long time; some of the Hebden men liked him well enough, for he could be very friendly when he chose, and could tell a good story. But poor Annie fell ill after that, and the Vicar sent her to the seaside, but she died for all that—they said it was a decline."

The old man stopped for breath. "But if the Squire was like that," I said, "and if the people believed all this about him, did they never show him what they thought of him?"

"Well, not for a long time, sir," said the old man. "You see, he was a cousin of the Vicar's, and the Vicar used to stand up for him. Some of the men in the place went one day to the Vicar and complained about the Squire; and the Vicar said to them, 'It isn't the

Squire,' he said, 'as does the harm—it's your fear of him. The worst harm he can do is to make you afraid of him—it's the fear does the rest.' That was a true word, sir. But a little while after that, some of the same men, who had been having a bit of a drink, went up to the Manor, and began shouting under the windows, and beating on cans, and carrying on. And some of them threw stones and broke some of the windows—the Squire would never have them mended afterwards, but boarded them up. Someone saw and told the Vicar, and he ran down, but before he got there, the big door flung open, and the Squire, he marched out, and stood on the steps between the gateposts. 'Here I am,' he says, without turning a hair, and they say his face was dreadful to look upon, all white, with his eyes flaming; and then he called them cowards, brute beasts, and a lot of things that it wouldn't be hardly proper for me to repeat nor for you to hear. And he invited them to do what they liked to him. But no one dare lift a finger. 'There,' he said, 'you daren't so much as speak.' And someone in the crowd piped up at that and called him a hard name. 'Oh, so that's what you think,' said the Squire; 'and if you weren't such a little cur, I'd ask you to step out here, and do you the honour of knocking you down.' And then he stopped short, and said, 'But there's a better way than that!' and he looked about him, they say, like a devil, and then they began to slink away, one by one; and some of them began to run. And that was the end of that evening's work. But would you believe it, sir, Billy Dale—that's the one that spoke—within a week went clean crazy, and was took away; and after that they left the Squire alone."

I felt that I had perhaps better not listen to more of these tales. I did not know how much was fact and how much fiction. But it was clear that the Squire was a man suspected of unspeakable things, and not without some reason. I began to feel that the best course would be to forget all about them. But then, why was Bendyshe so hot on the scent; and suddenly, like a flash of lightning, the truth, or what seemed the truth, dawned upon me. The evil was not dead; it was alive and active; and Bendyshe was trying to drag it to the light. Evil, of course, was anywhere and everywhere. But had something been done, did something remain in the house, that formed as it were a guarded stronghold of evil? Was there a core of malignant influence which needed to be extirpated? And if so, by what hideous personal agency, what bodiless ministers of fear was it perpetuated?

And then it dawned upon me that if there was any truth in my thoughts, Bendyshe must be exposed to dangers of a kind that defied precaution, and the more courageous he was, the nearer he got to



the goal, the more appalling was the danger. I could not quite understand what part the Vicar was playing in all this. He was standing by Bendyshe—that was clear; but I thought that his kindly and generous nature might perhaps blind him to the danger, by leading him to believe that things had never been so bad as were supposed. In any case my duty was clear: I must stand by Bendyshe at any risk, and share the danger with him. It was a contest of wills, perhaps; and I could possibly, by throwing my own will into the scale, turn the current against our adversaries. And in any case I felt that I must not be left any longer in the dark, but must know exactly what had happened, and what had induced Bendyshe to embark on the quest.

I wandered on in the grip of these thoughts, hardly knowing where I went; I felt for a moment that I ought to return at once to the house—that I was like a sentinel deserting his post; but, on the other hand, I felt that it might be simply foolhardy and reckless to go back and wait in solitude until Bendyshe and the Vicar returned, and that some experience might befall me which would mar or damage such effectiveness as I might possess.

I got a cup of tea at an inn which proved to be about five miles from Hebden; and then I strolled quietly back, arriving about seven. To my relief the car caught me up about half a mile out of the village. Both Bendyshe and the Vicar looked tired, and were very grave. I talked vaguely about my wanderings, and they gave me but scanty attention.

When we got to the house, I said to Bendyshe, "If the Vicar is not too tired, would he come back to dinner?—I have a special reason for asking this. I have something to tell you and some further questions to ask." The Vicar assented, and Bendyshe and I entered the house together, while the Vicar pledged himself to return at eight.

Bendyshe went to the smoking-room, and flung himself down in a deep chair. "Any the worse for yesterday?" I said.

"Oh, I'm stiff as a board, and dog-tired," he said rather impatiently, "and just when I had need of all my strength; but we have found what we wanted to know, and it is all as I expected, only worse; and now the whole business is in such a tangle that I hardly know what to do!" Then he added, "Why were you so keen that the Vicar should come back? He has had a shock, and seems to me done up."

"I couldn't help it," I said; "today I have thought it all out, and I'll stick to you through thick and thin; but I feel that I must know all, and know at once. If I am to share a danger, I must know what the danger is; I can't be of any use if I am still groping in the dark."

"Yes, you're right," said Bendyshe wearily. "I have been feeling that too—but I wanted you to form your own opinion."

When we went up to dress, Bendyshe said, looking round, "I don't like the feel of the house tonight, old man. There's mischief brewing of a bad kind—but we'll weather it out!" I was conscious too myself of a sort of heavy and brooding stillness everywhere; but I saw and heard nothing.

## 8

At dinner, while the servants were in the room, we did our best to talk of indifferent matters. It was like a bad play, I thought. When we adjourned to the smoking-room, Bendyshe said to the Vicar, 'Here, Vicar, Hartley says that he thinks he had better have the whole story, and I agree with him. He won't be taken by surprise; and it's no use pretending now that it is a mild sort of investigation; it's a battle of a bad kind, and we must be forearmed, if we can. I made a mistake last night by taking the offensive—and now hell's loose— But I'll go ahead.

"It was about three years ago that the thing began," said Bendyshe. "I don't know why it didn't begin before—perhaps it *had* begun; but I had been getting more and more interested in my problem, and I had been, I suppose, training my perceptions without knowing it; and the curtain went up with a run. I ought to say that when I first settled in here, I had taken the unfurnished room for my study. But I could never work there in any peace. There seemed to be something on the move there, and if I sat at the table, I used to feel there was someone behind me; and there were odd noises overhead too. I had the roof examined—the only way in was through a little trap-door in the ceiling, in the corner where the plaster came down—but above, there was only a long, low loft, lit by a window looking out on the tiles and gutters, with a cistern in it and waterpipes, and the builder said that the noises came from the pipes.

"However, one day I was coming down the corridor, I saw a man standing by the door of the room—the same man, Hartley, I will tell you at once, that you saw up there, the same dress, the same sort of expression. I thought it must be a plumber for a moment; when it suddenly came upon me with a rush that the wall, so to speak, was broken down, and I had seen something that a normal healthy man has no business to see. I said out loud, "What are you doing there?—who are you?" but he took no notice of me whatever, and continued to stand by the door, like a man who wanted something badly,

and had been trying for a long time to get it, but all in vain. I didn't think of it as being in any definite and actual way connected with the place—I thought it was an hallucination produced by overtaking my nerves in one direction. I went along to the door, my eyes fixed on the man, and suddenly he was gone. I wasn't exactly frightened, but I felt uneasy about myself. I went up to town and saw a doctor, a friend of mine. He sounded me and questioned me up and down; then he declared me perfectly well in every way. I told him about my studies, and he asked me if I had ever seen any such figure in real life, in childhood, or had any fright or shock connected with such a figure. But I couldn't think of anything. He told me at last that he was frankly puzzled, but that he had little doubt that it was an hallucination, and did in some way result from my thinking so much about such phenomena. He gave me the advice to turn to other occupations for a bit, limit my work, have more company in the house—all very sensible.

"I did just what he advised, and had a succession of guests here, who bored me to death; and I took up constitutional history, as the least exciting subject I could find. But a fortnight later I saw the thing again, this time in my study, looking up at the trap-door. I got up, and walked straight up to him—and the same thing happened; he took no notice of me whatever, and when I was within a foot of him, disappeared.

"Then I did what I ought to have done before; I went to the Vicar and told him the whole story—and then it came out. The Vicar told me, with a good deal of hesitation, that the figure I described was beyond all doubt the figure of Hugh Faulkner himself, just as he looked in his later years. Wasn't that so?"

The Vicar nodded. "It was unmistakable, your description! And it gave me a dreadful shock, though I can't say I was exactly surprised." Then the Vicar turned to me and said: "Of course, Mr Hartley, I am a firm believer in the immortality of the spirit; and I believe that we preserve identity and intelligence, and are not much affected or altered by death; but the spirit is, of course, a bodiless thing—a conscious and intelligent influence. I want to make this clear. There was nothing *material* there to see; but I realized that Bendyshe had somehow or other got within the range of Faulkner's thought, and that the figure was evolved out of this thought acting on Bendyshe's mind, just as we evolve figures in our dreams."

"Yes," said Bendyshe, "but I was also aware that Faulkner was not consciously influencing me—in fact, I think he was wholly unaware of my existence then; and this was a great relief to me—I was simply a spectator of what was going on, just as you were when you saw

him. In fact, if I may say so, I doubt if it was *his* mind acting on yours which made you see him. I think it was *my* mind. And then," he went on, "I saw the figure pretty often. But never in the presence of anyone else—that seemed an absolute bar, I don't know why. I lost all fear of it, and just accepted it as a fact. Once or twice I saw it in the garden, and once or twice downstairs, but almost always in the corridor upstairs, or in the empty room. But I didn't want to run any risks. So I had the trap-door plastered up, moved the furniture out, and locked the place up."

"Meanwhile I speculated about it, and discussed it with the Vicar; and we came to the conclusion that there was some particular thing that Faulkner was—I won't say looking for exactly, but trying to trace, some book, perhaps, or manuscript—I couldn't make it out—but we decided at last that it was something which someone else had hidden; but was it in the house at all? Or if so, why couldn't he see it? Or if he could see it, what could he do with it? I don't believe that these spirits have any material powers at all—they can only act through living brains."

I turned to the Vicar. "Did you ever see the figure?" I said.

"No," he said, "I did not—I don't know why. I was nearer to Faulkner than anyone living, except his servant. But I have thought that perhaps Faulkner wished to conceal the very existence of the thing, whatever it is, from me, and was careful not to bring me in."

"But why then did Bendyshe see him?" I asked.

"Oh," said Bendyshe, "I stumbled into it by accident, I believe—it was just a question of my power of perception being heightened."

"But let me ask one other thing," I said: "How do you account for your seeing it only occasionally? If the thing is always in Faulkner's mind, you ought to see it constantly."

"Well," said Bendyshe, "we don't know what his mental occupations may be—I daresay he has other things to think of."

"Yes, indeed," said the Vicar, shaking his head; "he was a very self-willed and perverse man—he has much to learn."

Bendyshe gave a grim smile, and went on, "What I believe is this—that at times the spirit of Faulkner remembers this thing, whatever it is, and believes it to be still in this house. The result is that for a time his thought is occupied with the house and the familiar rooms; and being an abstract essence, it ranges about the well-known scene; and if one comes within the reach of it, one sees the figure automatically."

"But why, then, does the figure disappear when you come close to it?"

"Ah, I don't know everything," said Bendyshe; "indeed, there is

much that quite baffles me. But I have thought that it may be in some way obliterated by the proximity of my own consciousness, as the moon obliterates the light of the surrounding stars—but that is only my idea.”

“And now,” he went on, “we come to the more serious part of the story. Some weeks ago I became suddenly aware that the spirit of Faulkner had become aware of mine. I suppose I had begun to speculate more closely as to where the lost thing was, and what it might be. And then, too, it had occurred to me that the old sergeant might be still alive—the Vicar had told me that he thought he was dead—and I had begun to make some enquiries, and had employed a detective to try to trace the man. We now know that he was alive all the time. Faulkner had given him some money at various times, and after Faulkner’s death the sergeant had rented a farm in Hampshire, a little bit of a place; but he had taken to drink, and was in a bad way, nearly at the end of his resources. He became aware that he was being tracked, and I daresay there were plenty of other things about which he might have got into trouble. Anyhow, he was frightened. He sold his farm, which was mortgaged, so he only got a few pounds out of it; and he went off on the tramp. The money was spent at last, and he took cold by sleeping in the open air; he was taken to the workhouse at Pentlow, near Horsham, and went to the infirmary with rheumatic fever.”

“But I must go back for a moment. While all this was going on, I became aware, as I told you, that I had for some reason or other come within Faulkner’s consciousness, and that he realized that someone was on the same scent as himself. His expression seemed to me to change when I saw him, he looked angry and defiant, and as though he was guarding the approach to something. But even so he was not apparently at first conscious of my physical presence. Then he assumed a menacing air, and made gestures of anger and rage. It was at this time that I asked you to join me here, because I began to feel that I *must* have someone with me—that I could not be sure of my nerves not failing me; moreover, his appearances became much more frequent.”

“And then you came, but instead of telling you everything at once, which would have been by far the best course, I waited, in order to see whether you had any perception of his presence; and when you began to notice certain phenomena, I made excuses and gave explanations—it was all very stupid—in order that you might have your own experiences and draw your own conclusions.”

“And then a quite new development occurred. The old sergeant died in the workhouse, and the first intimation of it that I got was

the appearance of a new figure at the window, which you also saw. I did not know what to make of this, though I had a strong suspicion; but it happened that they found on the man a letter from someone in the village—one of his old acquaintances—which seemed to show that he had lived here; and then they wired to the Vicar to say that an unknown man had died in the workhouse—they gave a brief description of him—who seemed to have once lived at Hebden. The Vicar sent the wire on to me, as you know, and I was sure who it was; we went off together to identify him, and the Vicar recognized him at once. That is the position of affairs."

"But," I said, "in what way is he connected with these papers, or whatever they are?"

"Do you remember," said Bendyshe, "that the Vicar said something about a despatch-box that was missing after Faulkner's death?"

The Vicar turned to me. "I ought to have been more explicit," he said. "For some time before his death, I noticed that Faulkner was always writing when I saw him, and that when I came in, he always slipped the papers into an old despatch-box on the table, and locked them up. I remember once asking him what he was writing. 'My memoirs,' he said with an ugly kind of smile—"an interesting book, don't you think?" When he died, I am nearly certain that the box was by his bedside, though I could not swear to it; and we thought—the lawyer who came down to see about the property and I—that there might be papers of importance in it; but when we questioned the sergeant, who knew the box perfectly well, he stuck to it that he hadn't seen the box for the day or two preceding Faulkner's death, and that he was quite certain that Faulkner had hidden it somewhere—and I couldn't be sure that he was not right."

"Yes," said Bendyshe, "and what I conjecture happened was that the sergeant, thinking that the contents of the box might be valuable, or indeed might incriminate himself in some way, had secured it himself, meaning later to remove it. That would explain everything—it would explain why Faulkner did not seem to know where it was, and further it would explain what happened to me there last night."

"What exactly did happen?" I asked.

"I'll tell you," said Bendyshe, looking up at me, "just how it was. I had had a ladder brought up here. Whether the fall of the plaster was purely accidental, I don't know, but anyhow it gave me the idea that the papers had been hidden up in the loft. I didn't like to ask you to join me, Hartley, but I did a very rash and idiotic thing. In the afternoon, I took the ladder into the room, and when the house was all quiet, I went in with a lantern and up into the loft. At first all was quiet, and I hunted about everywhere, but found nothing.

Then suddenly I became aware that I was not alone, and I saw two figures standing together in the far corner of the loft looking down at the boarded floor. And then I felt no doubt at all that I had got near the hiding-place. I had better have gone away at once, and bided my time; but instead, I was fool enough to go to the place. I don't quite know what happened. They flew at me like two wild beasts. It was not a case of any physical violence—it was just a contest of will and brain; but I had all the terror of being attacked, without the possibility of offering any physical resistance. I simply felt that my mind would give way. I ran down the loft, and tried to get on to the ladder; but I slipped when I was half through the hole, cut my neck, I suppose, on the jagged edges of the broken laths; and you heard my fall!"

"What an appalling business!" I said—and there was a silence for a moment. Then I said, "But why did the sergeant not remove the box after Faulkner's death?"

"Ah! I can explain that," said the Vicar. "He had not the time. We had moved Faulkner's body into another room, and we had some talk with the sergeant, Mr Hartley, and I suppose he was frightened. He had got hold of a certain amount of money, as it was; and I imagine he never dared to come back."

"There are just two things more," I said: "what *are* these papers, after all?"

"Ah! that I don't know," said Bendyshe; "but I imagine that they are what Faulkner called his experiments—an account of what he did, or tried to do, and the devices by which he carried them out. The force he used was fear, and the question is, how can you frighten people purely through the agency of the mind? We must remember that Faulkner was a very able man, and that the sergeant was clever enough in his way too—and that they were both men of remarkable courage and force of character."

"And if we grant that," I said, "what do they want to do with the papers?"

"My belief," said Bendyshe, "is that they just want to guard them—to preserve them somehow. I don't think they have a very clear idea about them. They don't want them to be made public, and yet they want to hand on their secrets to someone who will use them. If any of us three, for instance, were a man inclined to make use of these agencies, we should encounter no opposition; but at present they simply know that we are hostile, that we want to find the papers, and perhaps to put an end to them; and this they mean to prevent as well as they can."

"What are we going to do?" I said.

"I am afraid that the question rather is," said Bendyshe, "what are *they* going to do?"

The words were hardly out of his lips when an answer came—a thin high mocking laugh was heard in the air, in the middle of us. I can't say how inexpressibly horrible it was, to feel in the presence of something hostile and derisive, and yet not to know what it could do or might do. The horror was that it was *there*. The silent auditor knew what we had said and what was in our minds; and we could do nothing. It seemed to me for a moment as if I should lose control of myself, and that my brain would give way under the consciousness of this unseen and intangible presence. I looked at Bendyshe, and he was sitting clasping the arms of his chair, looking down and frowning.

The Vicar rose unsteadily to his feet, his face very pale. "Merciful God," he said, "here have I been fighting with evil all my days, and trying to think it was weaker than good—and now that I am confronted with it, I can do nothing—nothing."

"No," said Bendyshe, looking up; "that isn't so, Vicar! You have a far stronger hold of this business than either Hartley or myself. We are just fighting for ourselves and our sanity, but you have got bigger forces with you. I want to ask you one thing: Hartley and I—or I—must go and find this thing, whatever it is—and *there's no time to be lost!* The longer we put it off, the worse it will be. But will you stay with us, and see the end? Whatever happens, you must not lose faith."

When Bendyshe spoke of the necessity of our going straight to our goal and without delay, I confess that I had an access of fear more terrible than anything I had ever experienced. The blood seemed to stand still in my brain—my strength seemed to ebb from me; but I felt too that the idea of giving up, of turning tail now, would leave even a worse legacy of terror behind. It was not a question of moral courage—there simply was no way out.

The Vicar said nothing in reply, but he put up his hand—clasped first Bendyshe's and then mine. And the next minute we were out in the hall. Then Bendyshe took command.

## 9

We had risen, and stood looking at each other in silence.

"Now, don't hurry," Bendyshe said. "Try just to think of what



we are going to do. I shall want something to prise up the boards with. I know!" He went back to the smoking-room, and returned in a moment with an old ice-axe. Its blade was protected by a leathern cover, and Bendyshe slipped it off. Then he strode to the foot of the stairs and went deliberately up; I followed him, and the Vicar followed me. In a moment we were on the landing. The house was deathly still, with a brooding stillness, like that of a thunder-cloud. Bendyshe drew out his key, and produced two electric torches from his pocket, and then said, "Now, I go first, because I know where the thing is; and when I am up the ladder—in the loft, Hartley—you come up; and, Vicar, will you stay in the room, and lend a hand? And mind this—they can do *nothing* so long as we don't fear them; or if we do, we must behave as if we did not."

Then he unlocked the door, and we went into the room. Bendyshe clicked on both the electric torches, and gave one to the Vicar. The moon was shining bright, and the shadow of the casements lay dark on the floor.

Then I suddenly became aware of a strange shadow, of an impenetrable blackness, in the corner of the room under the trap-door. But Bendyshe strode out straight to the foot of the ladder, and seemed to me for a moment engulfed in darkness. I followed close behind; and there was nothing there. "You see," said Bendyshe to me in a low tone—"it will all be like that."

But as we stood together at the foot of the ladder, a stream of ice-cold air came gushing down from the hole in the ceiling, as if coming out of some frozen cave, so cold that I felt my very bones shivering under their covering of flesh. But Bendyshe slipped his hand through the loop of the axe, and then very slowly and deliberately began to ascend the ladder. "Come when I call," he said, "and not before." I looked round; the Vicar was on his knees in prayer; but neither that nor Bendyshe's courage gave me any relief. I just thought of the next thing I had to do. Bendyshe disappeared through the hole, and I heard him step out on the floor of the loft. Then he said, "Now come!" The Vicar held his torch up to illuminate the steps of the ladder, and step by step I went slowly up in the icy air.

As soon as my head and shoulders were in the loft, I felt Bendyshe slip my arm. "Steady," he said, "step carefully." Bendyshe raised his torch, which sent a long stream of light down the loft, and then in the silence came a strange tremor and agitation of the empty air. "Hold on," said Bendyshe, "it will be all over in a moment! Hold on to the top of the ladder, and keep your eye on me." He walked slowly up the loft, to a place about twenty feet away, looking carefully at the boards and turning the torch down on them. "Now," he said,

"come up here slowly and hold the torch for me--this is the place!"

Bendyshe bent his head down, and examined the boards. Then he raised his axe and delivered a tremendous blow at the chink between the boards, and then another. The chips of the broken board flew out on the floor; suddenly from the hole he had made there was protruded a dusky thing. It was the head of a great snake; I could see its dull blinking eyes, the black spots that ran in a chain down its forehead, its flickering tongue, and the greenish pallor of its throat. Bendyshe struck another blow, and the creature came out, reared itself up as though to strike at us, and then as suddenly darted back into the hole again. Bendyshe again raised the axe, and struck fearlessly again. There was now a considerable hole between the boards, and he reversed the axe, inserted the point under the loose board, and putting his foot on the head of the axe brought it down like a lever; the board cracked and split; Bendyshe dropped the axe, and bending down seized the board and tore it up.

A dreadful sight met my eyes. The whole cavity was filled with snakes, entwining, interlocked, writhing; sometimes a head was put up from the mass, and sometimes half a dozen would detach themselves and wriggle over the floor. I must confess that I was now half frantic with horror. But Bendyshe plunged his hands into the mass of snakes, and drew out an old leather despatch-box covered with dust. "This is it," he said; and I was bending down to look at it, when a thing more dreadful than any of our previous experiences occurred. The icy air beat upon us, and turning my head, I saw standing behind us, stiff and upright, a corpse, swathed in grave-clothes, with pale leaden-coloured hands hanging down; the face was of the same hue, with a fringe of ragged-looking grey hair straggling over the forehead. It had a faint smile, it seemed, on its lips, and its dull eyes, grey like chalcedony, looked fixedly at the opening in the floor; and then a heavy odour of corruption began to spread around us. And then for a moment I wished that I had died rather than have come into this place of horrors. Bendyshe himself turned, and confronted the gaze of the figure. Then he signed to me to pick up the torch and axe, and walked firmly down the loft to the ladder's head.

"Go down first," he said, "and I will lower the box to you--don't leave go of it, whatever happens." And so I pushed on. It was no time to hesitate. I climbed hastily down the ladder, and on reaching the floor, saw the Vicar standing with his back to me, looking out of the window. But I had no time to attend to anything else, and cried out in a cautious tone, "Now, the box"--and it appeared from the orifice. I seized hold of it, and a moment later Bendyshe began to descend the ladder. But when he reached me, I saw that his strength

was failing. At that moment the Vicar turned round, and came up to me with out-stretched hands as if to receive the box. I was about to hand it to him, when Bendyshe cried out in an unsteady voice, "No, no-keep hold of it, I say-don't you see?"

And then I hardly knew for a moment what happened. Something seemed to rush towards me in a passion half of rage, half of entreaty. I was fighting with shadows. The figure that I had thought to be the Vicar came nearer and looked me in the face-and it was Faulkner himself, in a fury of baffled rage and despair, such as a human mind can hardly conceive; and while I gazed fascinated, I heard Bendyshe come close beside me; and the Vicar himself came forward out of the dark corner of the room, and after that I knew no more.

I awoke not long after from a kind of stupor. I was conscious of having been led and propelled down the corridor. I was in my bedroom, lying on my bed, and the Vicar was sitting beside me with a very anxious face. "How do you feel?" he said in a gentle voice.

"Oh," I said, "I'm all right-in mind, that is; I feel very tired and battered, but not damaged, at least not irretrievably. What I most want is sleep, I think. I suppose I fainted?"

"Yes," said the Vicar, "and I was afraid it was worse; but don't let us talk about that now."

"Where is Bendyshe?" I said.

"Oh, he is all right," said the Vicar; "he has just gone to get something for you. He will be here in a moment. He is very anxious, and so am I, that we should settle at once, without any delay, about these papers, whatever they are. But he and I disagree; and if you feel up to it, he would like to have your opinion."

"I don't know that my opinion is worth much just now," I said.

But at that moment Bendyshe entered the room with a little cut-glass flask in his hand. He showed few traces of an ordeal-indeed he looked more self-possessed and determined than ever. He carried the box with him, I noticed. He came to my bedside and took my hand. "Well, old man," he said, "this is a good sight! I was afraid . . . well, I won't say what I feared, but I felt that if things had gone wrong, I should never have forgiven myself for bringing you in. How are you feeling-only a faint, you think? Well, I am sure of it-heart, not brain, gave way." He poured something out of the flask, a clear aromatic liquid, and asked me to drink it off. "It is quite harmless," he said. "It will give you an extreme lucidity of mind for about half an hour, and then the best sleep you have ever had in your life."

I drank it, and the other two sat in silence. A few minutes later I sat up and said, "It is very strange-I could not have believed I could

have felt like this. I can remember and see quite clearly all that happened yesterday—was it yesterday? But there's no horror about it. I feel extraordinarily happy—something poisonous seems to have cleared away, and I don't think it will come back.'

"Yes," said Bendyshe, "I think we have cleared the air somewhat—blown up the wasps' nest, perhaps! But now—do you feel fit to hear two sides of a question? These horrible papers—what is to be done with them? My own view is that I should go through them carefully. They may have immense evidential value. Here is the packet." He opened the despatch-box—I noticed that he had forced the lid—and took out a small packet of papers, not more than a hundred sheets, I guessed, carefully tied up with black ribbon, and sealed with two large seals. He put the packet in my hands. On the first page was written in a bold handwriting, "*A record of experiments made at Hebden Manor-house between the years 1890 and 1903, with the results obtained by Hugh Faulkner and Harry M'Gee. It is earnestly desired that anyone into whose hands they may come will have them examined by someone of scientific eminence, as they deal with the surprising development of a comparatively unknown psychical force, the results of which have been of an extraordinary character.*" It was signed "*Hugh Faulkner.*"

"Mind," said Bendyshe, "I will take the entire and sole responsibility for examining the packet; and I will add that if I had been able to find the packet unaided—as I think I should have done—I should have gone through the whole thing with the utmost care."

"Bendyshe," said the Vicar, very gravely—and I saw that he was in a state of great depression and exhaustion—"I implore you not to speak like this! If you had attempted to take possession of the packet single-handed, it would have cost you your reason, and perhaps your life. It may be that you would have lost something even more precious than life. And I must say something more, painful though it may be. You are not as strong as you think! You are in greater danger at the moment than you were in either of your two visits to that unholy place up there. My feeling is that the papers should be instantly destroyed. I regard them as I would regard a case which I knew to contain the living germs of all the deadliest diseases known to humanity. For you to read them would be deliberately to introduce into your own spirit the most satanical of all infections."

Bendyshe listened to the Vicar's words with a look of ill-concealed impatience, and then turning to me, he said, "Now, Hartley, it is for you to decide. The quest was mine, and it was the Vicar's duty to help me; but you are the volunteer, who might have been a martyr, who made the search successful. I leave it in your hands."

"Bendyshe," I said, "you have given me a dreadful task. I see what

you feel about it, but I have no sort of doubt that the Vicar is right. We have torn the evil out by the roots, with terrible risks, and you would propose to plant it again for the sake of scientific curiosity?"

Bendyshe stood holding the packet in his hands.

"You would destroy knowledge which has been paid for by a man's soul," he said.

"Yes," said the Vicar, "because it is the price of blood—and you dare not traffic with that!"

I looked up; and in a flash I saw, a little way from the group, the figure of Faulkner kneeling, his hands clasped and a look of agonized entreaty on his face. I lost control of myself. "It must be destroyed at once," I said, "now and here!"

"Very well," said Bendyshe, "I yield—but I shall regret it all my life!" He said no more, but drew a knife from his pocket, cut the ribbon, drew out a mass of closely-written sheets, stuffed them loosely into the empty hearth, and set fire to the heap. The little pile flared up, and in five minutes was a glowing lump, the writing standing out in lines of fire; and a moment later it was nothing but ashes. And at that moment Bendyshe and the Vicar, who had been gazing at the fire, looked up; and they too saw the figure of Faulkner. But then a strange thing happened, and so swiftly that I can hardly say what it was—a figure in white, young, radiant, smiling, seemed to step up to Faulkner from behind, like a bringer of good tidings.

Bendyshe put his hand before his eyes. The Vicar clasped his hands together. "The uttermost farthing!" he said in a tone of intense joy, "and he departs thence—that is the mercy of God."



# OLIVER ONIONS

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## The Rope in the Rafters

*During the first half of this century George Oliver Onions (1873-1961) produced a series of polished and stylistic, but also highly original, novels and stories. A true-grit Yorkshireman by birth Onions went to great lengths in every new book to break fresh ground, risking popular success for distinctive and demanding works. Today when few people strive to reap rewards from a difficult work, Onions's novels have fallen into disfavour. It was true even at the time of his death: The Times obituarist wrote of him that he 'was a novelist of uncommonly sensitive and original imagination and of commanding resources of craftsmanship and style, and one who had received far less recognition than was his due.' In the field of fantastic fiction Onions is remembered for a remarkable collection of stories called Widdershins (1911). This contained 'The Beckoning Fair One', which many believe to be one of the greatest of all ghost stories. Onions, himself, had no truck with the supernatural but this did not stop him creating a convincing atmosphere with frightening verisimilitude. In 'The Rope and the Rafters', though, first published in his Collected Ghost Stories in 1935, Onions drew upon a real supernatural episode experienced by his son Arthur. One night in lodgings Arthur suddenly became aware of a presence in his bedroom and though he could see nothing, he could hear breathing and could smell the overpowering aroma of damp earth. That was all Oliver needed.*

## I

FOR THE LAST SEVEN miles of his journey James Hopley's hopes had sunk lower and ever lower till now, at the gates of the château itself, he heartily wished he had never left the clinic in Paris. The driver of the single-horse voiture had descended from the seat and with the rain beating on his back was struggling with the rusty fastenings. One of the gates had come away from its masonry, and the pair of them were only held together by the lock in the middle and a turn or two of old dog-chain, and even when he had got them apart he had to hold them so while he led the horse through by the bridle. With one of his eyes, for the other was of glass, James Hopley looked through the streaming panes at the desolate and unkempt avenue. Then he groaned. The château itself had come into view. The whole of one end of it was a skeleton of scaffolding. New windows were being broken through, a new chimneystack was being built. The rain beat down on dumps of broken brick and debris and laths torn out of walls, the yewtrees dripped on barrows and wheeling-planks and weeds. A Henri Quatre château in the depths of the country! This was the place Blanche and the doctors had said would do him all the good in the world!

For many years past Blanche's kindnesses to him had been innumerable. She had written to him when nobody else had, had remembered him when the rest of the world had forgotten him. This loan of her château was only the most recent of her benefactions. But there was one thing she would not do. She would keep her memory of him as he had been. Never, never would she see him again. And he sometimes felt that this was her greatest kindness of all.

By a terrace door in an angle of the façade the driver tugged at an iron bellrod. After a longish interval the door was opened by an elderly, bald, greybearded man in a red baize apron, behind whom stood a meagre woman in black. These were evidently the Marsacs, who were to look after him during his convalescence. Without a word the man reached behind him for a huge umbrella and came forward to hold it over James. From under its edge James saw a long terrace frontage with tall windows and more tall windows above them. In an inner lobby a second door stood half open. The man in the apron had returned to fetch his belongings.

Then happened something that seemed little short of a miracle. Stepping forward James suddenly found himself in a lofty room with panelled and tapestried walls, vast armoires, and a wide stone hearth on which, behind massive firedogs, a great wood fire burned. Near



it a small period table was laid for one, with cutlery, a napkin and a large jar of montbretia. By a glass stood a tall bottle of wine with the cork invitingly half drawn. Outside the mud and the rain and inside—this! He stood looking round the surprising room and then turned to the woman, who with eyes averted was waiting for her orders.

“You seem to have been busy, Madame Marsac,” he said. The woman had a voice as harshly shrill as that of a parrot. But busy! Only the day before yesterday nothing, not a chair, and then, *mon Dieu*, everything arriving by road from Paris at once! Busy!

And if Madame Marsac had been busy here his friend Blanche had been no less busy at the auction-rooms of the Hôtel Drouot in Paris. Chez Drouot one can buy for a song ancient and elephantine pieces of furniture that no modern room will take, and here they were, the tapestries and leather-backed chairs, tall oil-lamps of bronze and onyx, a battle-piece big enough for a wall at Versailles, porcelain vases as large as those of the Forty Thieves. But James Hopley had put out his hand to the bottle with the half-drawn cork. Even a *gueule cassée*, blown up by high explosive in the war and not dug out of the earth again for a week, may still like the inner warmth of a glass of wine. So here was to Blanche. Her white-elephant of a château was not turning out so badly after all.

## 2

That afternoon, the rain still continuing, he took a walk round this place that had been so generously put at his disposal. Strictly speaking it was not so much a chateau as a hunting-box, of two tall stories and a hipped and dormered roof above that, with one row of windows facing the terrace and the other looking across the neglected park to the river that joined the sea some dozen miles away. But it was the topmost floor of all that instantly seized James Hopley's imagination. What a place for a couple of boys to have played hide-and-seek in! Except for the roof itself this upper portion had never in fact been completed. Floorboards ended suddenly, leaving bare the joists and the drop to the storey below. The dormers were infrequent and the light already failing, and when presently he began to strike matches as likely as not a sigh of wandering air blew them out again. He would in fact be wise to get to the safety of the lower levels before it became quite dark.

And suddenly he was checked. Something had struck him lightly in the face.

A bat? There might well be bats up there. And his matches were getting few, but he shielded one carefully in his hands. The object that had struck him was a rope, that swung from a beam overhead and disappeared in the shadows below. Still, with workmen about a place a rope was no unusual thing to find, and he turned away.

But by this time he had got confused about the building's plan. He descended to the mansard level again and found a door that opened on stairs similar to those he had come up by. He groped his way down these and in the darkness pushed at another door at the bottom. And the next moment he was in a high, lamplighted, kitchen sort of room, stacked half way to the ceiling with packing-cases and crates from which the paper and straw protruded. The lamp shone full on the bald head of the man in the red baize apron, who with the meagre woman his wife was sitting at a bare table having a frugal meal. He had stumbled into the caretaker's quarters.

He was about to apologise when suddenly he stopped. The woman, catching sight of him, had let out a harsh, ringing cry, and had clapped her hands before her eyes. The man's hand, too, had closed swiftly on the lighted lamp as if he would have hurled it. But he picked it up shakily instead, rising to his feet as he did so. His voice was strongly under control.

"Monsieur has no doubt missed his way; it is here," he said, and lamp in hand advanced to a door in a corner. He led the way across a draughty apartment empty except for sacks of cement, and opened another door. James was back in the large room that had first welcomed him, but this time from the fireplace end.

Mortified, dispirited, the slow recovery of weeks undone again at a single stroke, he sank into one of the leather-backed chairs. Always, always his face, and so he supposed it must be to the end. For in Paris, when the yearly performances were given, and the cap was passed around for the benefit of those afflicted as he was, be sure you would not find James Hopley standing next to the kiosk where his own picture-postcard was for sale, showing off his grafts and his paraffin-wax and his seared cheek, with the glass eye glittering as hard as a doll's in the middle of it all. Much more then, meeting people for the first time and in a place like this, he ought not to have shown himself without warning, appearing from nowhere at the foot of a flight of private stairs. But he made no mention of the incident when presently the woman came in to lay the period table for his supper. By that time he was busily writing. He was still writing when she came in to clear away. And as it is on this writing of James

Hopley's that this tale of him is largely based, a word had better be said about it.

The shiny, black-backed exercise-book before him was the fifth of the series. They contained his own account of his case apart from anything the doctors might have to say about it, and as they were written for his own eye only, they leave out much more than they put in. Naturally he did not tell himself things he already knew. But once in a while some unexpected result cropped up, and at present he was noting down this unfortunate beginning with the Marsacs. He passed his hand over his brow as he finished it, then closed his book, took his candle, and at a little after nine o'clock slowly mounted the echoing stairs to bed.

His bedroom, too, was Hôtel Drouot, with much ormolu and alabaster and cracked and faded gilding. It had two beds, a yard or so apart, as if Blanche had made ready either for married guests or for a single person like himself, and on a small commode between them stood the second candle-stick. James Hopley had had a long journey and was tired. He threw his dressing-gown across the second bed and got into the first one. There, having blown out his candle, he lay awake listening to the hundred noises of the gaunt place.

Outside the rain beat down without ceasing. Somewhere a door must have been left open, for he found himself waiting for a recurrent banging. Outside in the corridor vague gusts entered by the window-piercings, and somewhere on the scaffolding something flapped. Slowly that mortifying picture faded, of a woman who hid her face and screamed while a man's hand went to a lighted lamp. He yawned, drew up his knees, and slipped over the edge of sleep.

He was awakened by a sound different from any he had been listening to. It seemed to come from immediately overhead, and so heavy was the thud of it that it brought him upright on his pillow, startled and listening.

But when a sound wakes you from sleep, and is not repeated, it is not difficult to persuade yourself that you have dreamed it after all. James sank slowly back to his pillow again. But he was next conscious of a sudden alteration in the air; a strong odour seemed to have found its way into the room, and at the same time he was aware of a new sound, that came from somewhere in the room itself. It came from the direction of the other bed, and it was the sound of deep and painful breathing.

But it was on the sharp, pervading smell that his attention was first of all concentrated. Two of its components he could have accounted for readily enough. They were wet earth and freshly-bruised grass, and there was plenty of both outside. But to these was added

something else. It was the smell of the chest and arms of a man. Then he gave his attention to the breathing again.

Matches stood on the commode beside him, but he did not immediately put out his hand to them. Even the striking of a match would have been an interruption. Sometimes the sounds of the breathing died down, and then suddenly they fought, as if for life, filling the room with their noise. And James Hopley had never been in this *château* in his life before, but either that was the breathing of somebody he had known or else in some other way it broke suddenly through out of the dark tomb of the past. For it is the first time only that we forget. Set the chord vibrating again and thenceforward it continues to vibrate as long as we have a memory at all. In the darkness James lay listening to the breathing for a while longer; then he put out his hand for the matches.

But he instantly drew it back again, so many degrees colder was the air. It was in fact a minute or more before he managed to light one of the candles. The other bed was unchanged in appearance, with his dressing-gown still across it just as he had thrown it down. But *brr*, it was cold! The cold, that pungent smell of sweat, the breathing . . . .

He had put one foot out of bed and advanced his ear. He advanced it so close that he almost expected to feel the breath on his cheek. Then he placed his hand on the coverlet.

But that apparently he ought not to have done. There was the sigh of one who wakes from temporary forgetfulness to the intolerable burden of life again. The chilliness drew away. The breathing became fainter and died. The air cleared. The candle burned on as if nothing had happened.

### 3

Most of us like our bedrooms to ourselves. If we must share them we would rather do so with somebody who does not smell quite so strongly nor bring quite such a coldness into the air. But comparatively few of us have been through the ordeal James Hopley had been through. The main structure of our frame has not been so shattered that as a frame it can suffer no more, but only in its remaining separate fragments. Account for it as you will, James Hopley did not shrink from something that would have sent most of us back to Paris by the very next train. It was in fact a slight disappointment to him

that for the remainder of the night he was undisturbed. And he was busily writing it all down in his *cahier* before he had well swallowed his coffee the next morning.

Towards the middle of the morning, however, he was interrupted by the announcement of a visitor. The *curé* of the place had lost no time in coming to inquire after the health of Madame Blanche in Paris and to hope that M. Hopley himself had recovered from the fatigue of his journey. At least these were the reasons he gave for his call. James had no doubt he had others. One was probably curiosity, and James, who noticed such things, marked him creditably highly for his composure in the presence of skin-grafting and paraffin-wax. But for all that the *curé* had not talked for ten minutes before he was hinting that the château was perhaps not the best place for a convalescent to be staying in at that particular moment.

"When this rain stops the men will be at work again," he said, fingering his little silver cross. "And I see that one of your occupations is writing, which requires quiet. I cannot think you will be comfortable here. Come to me at my little house if you feel inclined. I should even be happy if you would spend some considerable time with me. My garden is pleasant and my apples are ripe. Also it would be society for me. Here—so near the river—the air is not salubrious."

This was generous, and James thanked the *curé*; but at the same time it looked a little like letting the cat out of the bag, and presently he was asking about the château itself, its history, legends, associations. It seemed a natural thing to do.

But he did not find the *curé* communicative. No place like that was without its hundred legends, some with a basis of truth, others the merest gossip, he said. Three houses had stood on those foundations before the present one. One story was that the wounded were brought to this château after the battle of Arcques. There were rumours concerning it during the Terror. Later, if vulgar report was to be believed, it had a history of smuggling. Its skeletons were best left in its cupboards. And that was about as much as the *curé* would commit himself to. Again he recommended his own vicarage. He accepted a glass of wine, but declined to stop and share James's midday meal, and James accompanied him as far as the rusty gates.

He found it interesting that the battle of Arcques had been fought in the neighbourhood. He did not know what weather that battle had taken place in, but a battle can be an earthy affair, with much trampled grass, and they who take part in it are exceedingly likely to sweat. But James could not believe that a battle fought nearly three hundred years ago had very much to do with himself. Had nothing happened in this country of France since then? The Terror was not

exactly yesterday either. As for smuggling . . . well, these people ought to know best, but he gave a shrug. The incident had made far too deep an impression on him to be dismissed like that. If it were merely that some desperado had been pistoled or knocked on the head while running a bale or two of wool from England, Blanche would have been proud of her ghost and would have told him in her letters. Walking slowly with head down and hands behind his back he fell into a deep musing.

Nevertheless he discovered the château's possibilities with regard to contraband that very afternoon. He found them in the cellars. These were a series of vaults on ancient foundations of flint, with great bays branching off them, a bakehouse, a laundry, wine-cellar with the old wooden bins still mouldering in them, and in the very middle of the house he nearly walked into an unrailed and unguarded well. A rope in the rafters to hang him and a well down here to drown him? But no. On examination he found the well to be a dry one. Then, making a swift calculation, he shone his electric torch up into the vaulting. There were signs that at some time or other, it had been cut through, and a tour of the other floors a little later in the day showed the remains of other trap-doors, boarded up and long disused, but all in a vertical line between the rope and the well. With a river across the park and the sea only a few miles away here was a depot for contraband ready made. But still he shook his head. Somewhere not far away there was a truer explanation than that. The rain was beginning to stop. Perhaps a turn outside would clear his thoughts and give some inner James Hopley a chance to say what he had to say. He descended the worn and grey and lichened steps at the end of the terrace. He walked along the edge of the shrub-grown moat, past the gnarled old orchard, and through knee-deep thistles down the slope of the park to the river. There, by the muddy, sliding water, that ought to provide good fishing when it cleared, he cast about as it were for a rise in his own mind.

His habit of avoiding all company but his own had made of this mind a sparsely-furnished but a severely-ordered one. Accordingly he began at the right end, namely, with the people he knew something about. First there was the *curé*. He was kind, hospitable and well-mannered. James was as touched by the offer of his house and orchard as if he had thought of availing himself of it. But the *curé* after all had to steer a middle course between two worlds, and vague talk about Arcques, the Terror and smuggling was all James was likely to get out of him. Next there was Marsac. Marsac was getting on in years. He lived rent-free, the produce of the gardens was enough for him and his wife, and if he lost this job he would not find it easy to get

another at his time of life. He would therefore put up with midnight bumps and alterations of temperature in a part of the house he was not called upon to occupy. Then there was Blanche herself. She was spending a lot of money on her purchase and would be coming to live there in the spring. As for the workmen, he hadn't seen them yet, but, like Marsac, they would not be likely to quarrel with their bread-and-butter.

But must every place affect everybody in precisely the same way and degree? Was there nothing in what a man brought to it? It was no light experience that James Hopley was bringing to this château of his friend's. A smell at which anybody else would simply have opened a window was for him charged with dreadful memories. Coldness to him was not a mere momentary discomfort but the coldness of all mortality, disturbed breathing the suffering of a human frame that could bear no more. Was it then to be wondered at that after that first night he was ready to appropriate *to himself* anything unusual there might be about that château, its past, its present, or anything else it might have in store? He continued his walk under the alders of the swollen river, sometimes wondering whether the air was really as insalubrious as the *curé* has said, but always returning to his thought . . . that if a man brought more to a place than he found there he already knew a good deal more about it than anybody else could tell him.

## 4

There is only one sure way of being present at the birth of a legend. That is to be oneself its origin. James Hopley left the river that afternoon with a highly remarkable idea in his head.

It had to do with this queer business of revived memory. Show a man for example a drawing of a person he has seen perhaps once; the chances are that he will have forgotten the person; but he will remember the drawing. So with the happenings of last night. Should they happen a *second* time then that would be a momentous and ineradicable event. It was not impossible that out of the sheer force of the stirring-up a third would follow, and a fourth. This was the idea James Hopley left the river with that afternoon.

But it was only the beginning of it. Something far more pregnant followed. It had been in 1916 that he had been blown up and had disappeared from the world for exactly seven days and seven nights.

Then had come his recent and unaccountable relapse in Paris. Therefore he was now a man who experiments upon the string of an instrument. Touch it never so lightly in the right place and you were answered by its harmonic. It might be a harmonic of a jangled and horrible discord, scraped rawly out on that open string of 1916, but it would be identical in its notes and duration, faithful in its other correspondences. Seven nights of actually-live-through hell then, seven nights of its etherealised repetition now. What was to happen after that does not seem to have troubled him very much. What would come would come, and it could hardly be worse than what had been. And oh, what a lot about this twilit edge of things he would know by that seventh night! As he took his candle to go to bed it seemed already strange to him that he had only been in that château of his own reawakened memories a little more than twenty-four hours.

But as he was turning down the bronze lamps the door beyond the fireplace opened and Marsac stood in the entry. And James was already finding Marsac not at all a bad fellow. He had intelligence above the average, and also a stolid sort of courage. Therefore he paused in his going to bed to exchange a word with him.

"It seems a pity to leave that fire," he said pleasantly, for its flames played richly on the tapestries and the high tinted ceiling. "I was just going upstairs."

"Until the workmen have finished it is not possible to put a fire upstairs for monsieur. Madame wrote suddenly, and there was little time to make ready," Marsac replied.

"Did Madame then think I had married without telling her? There are two beds," James said, his single eye on the caretaker's face to see how he took it

But Marsac made no sign. "It was as easy to put two as one, and she did not say how long monsieur might be staying."

"Because the place is not salubrious? It is what monsieur le curé said. For that reason he invited me to stay with him."

At that Marsac did go near to betraying himself. "Then no doubt monsieur will do so?" he asked quickly.

"I? Visit?" said James, and Marsac became the restrained domestic again.

"Monsieur is comfortable here? There is nothing else he requires to-night?"

"Nothing. Good night," and as the caretaker finished the putting out of the lamps the ceiling and tapestries looked the friendlier because of all that James Hopley knew for certain awaited him in the bed-chamber upstairs.

That night he again threw his dressing-gown across the second bed



and blew out his candle. But as he lay there awake he knew now what he was waiting for.

On the following morning a young workman in a blouse and peaked cap mounted a ladder and chanced to put his head into a window-aperture that opened to the long corridor inside. Suddenly a door immediately across the corridor opened, and James Hopley stood there. The workman descended hastily to where a couple of carpenters were sawing at a trestle under a portion of the scaffolding. He took off the peaked cap and passed his sleeve across his brow.

"Have you seen?" he whispered, glancing involuntarily over his shoulder.

"Has who seen what?" an older man demanded, pausing in his sawing.

"What has arrived. Mon Dieu! Jean the Smuggler will not have it all his own way in the château now!"

"It is the English *gueule cassée*. Mathilde Marsac told me. You have seen him?"

"If I have seen him! . . ." exclaimed the young man.

"What is he like?"

"Like! What is a nightmare like when it promenades itself by day? I will tell you what he is like . . ."

He did so. One of his listeners made a grimace, the other nodded.

"It is what Mathilde Marsac said. She saw him arrive, looking over her husband's shoulder. She saw him as he stood there in the salon, looking round. And that very same night, just as she was having her supper, the door of the back stairs opened and he stood there, his face like a cinder with a piece of glass in it . . ."

But the second carpenter was a more matter-of-fact sort of fellow. "Mathilde Marsac!" he scoffed. "Mathilde's knees knock together if she has to pass the churchyard in the daylight!"

"And is it not in the daylight that I have seen him, not five minutes ago?" the young workman demanded. "The night is the night. Such things belong to it. But at the beginning of the day . . ."

"Bah, poor devil! Marsac told me—Madame Blanche wrote it in the letter to say he was coming—that he will not go back to his own country because of those who might remember him there. Perhaps some woman—perhaps Madame herself—who knows? *Va!* Mathilde Marsac and our Francis here, now they have *both* seen Jean the Smuggler," and the speaker reached for his saw again.

But Francis the mason had seen what he had seen; and moved off to find another audience.

He had in fact seen, though without knowing anything about it,

an exceedingly startling development. It was one that James Hopley himself, writing at that moment his "roofer" to Blanche (and for what a roof!), had as yet no inkling of. For James was flushed with success. He had predicted an astonishing thing, and lo, it had straightway come true to the letter. But something else had come no less true with it. He had had no particular reason for looking at himself in the glass more attentively than usual that morning. All that he remembered of his getting up was that as he had stepped out of his room some young workman or other had hastily withdrawn his face from a window-opening. But James had in fact made his first serious misassumption. He had taken it for granted that the work of the doctors was now done once for all, past possibility of slipping back. An actual *physical retrogression* had been the last thing he had foreseen. Yet swift as a returned blow this had taken place within a few hours, and if it continued the inner ravage would but make the plastic superimpositions the more ghastly as time went on. It mattered little now what he wrote in or left out of his diary. The thing had already begun to write itself terribly on his face.

He was in fact already planning the next steps of his adventure at that very moment. He must try to take this room-fellow of his by surprise. What for example would happen if he were to change the position of the beds? If, approaching carefully, he tried whether that harsh breathing would stir the flame of a candle? Dim a looking-glass? If he spoke suddenly and loudly, setting subtle traps in his questions? But now that all was well afoot there was plenty of time. He did not notice that his midday meal was brought in that day not by Madame Marsac, but by her husband. But he did remember the workman who had looked across the corridor at him and, looking up, asked the caretaker his name.

"A brown-eyed, timid-looking young man in a blouse and a peaked cap," he said. "He was standing halfway up a ladder."

"That would be Francis, the mason," Marsac replied.

"Francis the mason. I see. They are good fellows, the workmen here?"

Marsac would not express an opinion. They were *comme ça comme ça* . . . all sorts.

"It is doubtless a fine thing for the village that Madame Blanche has acquired this property."

"No doubt it brings money."

"And will bring more when she herself comes and begins to entertain."

"The château has had its lean years. It is but just it should have its prosperous ones," Marsac replied.

"I sincerely hope it may have," said James, resuming his work, and the caretaker withdrew.

His work for the moment was to address Francis the mason in a sort of written monologue. James in fact talked to him with his fountain-pen as if he had been actually there. You are young, Francis (he wrote), and for the young one makes allowances. When you are as old as our friend Marsac here you will not look at a man for a moment like that and then draw back as if you had seen a ghost. You have perhaps finished your service, but wait till you have seen a war. They will make you a hundred ghosts there quicker than you can put your head through an opening and take it away again. Ghosts may not be all you think, friend Francis. Much depends on how much you bring with you. Are you married? Have you children? Children grow up and women grow old, and if that's all death's the end. But *is* it the end? That's what I'm trying to find out. In a very few nights I'm hoping to know. Would you like to know too? You look the sort it might be easy to tell. You may not be the first to be told. Madame Marsac looks like being that. But would you like to be the second?

And when a man sets out during his lifetime to find out what happens to him when he dies, a few days and nights are little enough for the task before him.

## 5

His first serious check awaited him on his fifth afternoon. It began with something that he afterwards called himself fool and dunderhead not to have thought of before. *Did he only breathe at night? Had he never lain down for a rest in the middle of the afternoon?* Also up to then he had been content to write of this visitor of his that after a certain time he "went." But where did he go? Even he couldn't go simply nowhere. This is what happened:

At about five o'clock that afternoon he needed something—it was nothing more than a clean handkerchief—that chanced to be in his bedroom, and went upstairs to get it. And this time he does not stint his description of what happened the moment he opened the bedroom door. He is, in fact, unpleasantly explicit, so we will simply say that the signs were at their maximum strength. And it was as he stood looking wonderingly down on that flat empty bed of suffering that he had his inspiration. *Where* did the fellow take himself off to when he was disturbed? Hitherto his manner towards his guest had varied.

There had been all those stealthy experiments to try. But even at his most intent he had shown a measure of consideration. Now he twitched off the coverlet abruptly. This fellow went back to the battle-field of Arcques when he left the bed, did he? To the Quartier St. Antoine or the Bastille? To a cave of the confederates of this smuggling gang? Well, wherever he went this time he would have to pass James Hopley at the door before he did so. James stood in the entry, waiting for the chill waft to pass before his face.

For it was by the coldness and the overpowering smell that he followed. After a moment or two these became less strong, but in the corridor the scent was still breast-high. Along the passage he followed in the direction of the stairs that led to the mansard, up the stairs into the space beneath the roof. He followed in cold blood, not into bat-haunted shadows now, but in pallid dusty daylight that showed up every detail of every post and beam. He came to where the floorboards ended and the drop to the stage below could be seen. Then the odour left him as cleanly as if it had fallen in one dense body over the edge, and he stood looking stupidly at the rope that dangled from the beam overhead.

Stupidly yet with eyes suddenly cleared, for he remembered now how that rope had been the first thing to greet him on his arrival at the house. With workmen about its presence had not struck him as sinister then, but now it beckoned to him like some dreadful lure. "Your life?" the gently-swaying, sinuous thing seemed to whisper. "It cannot be that *you* value life? When you remember yourself as you were twenty years ago? Have you forgotten? *The Past was the Best, the Present is Worse, the Worst is to Come!* Twenty years ago you lived every minute, because you know how few the minutes might be. If anything should happen at least a whole man would get it in head or stomach or groin. The feel of your body was like wine to you, you made friends of a sudden. Where are your friends now? Can you find one, where before every man had a wave of the hand for you, though you never saw him again? The best of them are dead. They would be glad to be dead if they could see to-day what they died for. It would at least be decent that all should be dead before men began to think of carnage again. But they are subtly at work, even those who saw it—security, rights, the glorious past, our immortal story, the heritage our fathers died for, our glory still to be. And what of the multitude who will believe anything if only the lie is big and noisy enough? Who cling to their leaders who prepared the evil, and saw the evil through, and made a worse evil to follow it, and are even now tired and helpless before an evil by the side of which the other would be good? Have you seen it once and want to see it

again? Do you *want* to live, James? In this world as it is? *The Past was the Best, the Present is Worse, the Worst is to Come.* Look at me, James, and ask yourself if you *want* to live." All this, and a thousand times more, the rope seemed to be saying to James Hopley as it hung there, gently swaying from the beam overhead.

And suddenly James Hopley covered his face with his hands. Blasted and blackened as he was, he *did* want to live. And he was afraid of that waving, beckoning thing. He turned and ran. He ran from some inner vision of what would happen to him unless he packed his bags and left that château at once. He ran to the door of his own room and put his hand on the knob, but even then he drew it back again with a cry. The door had been opened at the same moment from inside.

"Monsieur!" he heard Marsac's voice, hard and shaken.

"What . . . what . . . are you doing here?"

"Mon Dieu . . . if there is more of this I shall have to leave the service of monsieur . . ."

"I asked you . . . what are you . . ."

"I came to open the window of the room. It is not sanitary. The room needs air."

"Why do *you* do these things? Why do *you* now serve my meals? How is it that I do not see Madame?"

"It is that Madame is not well. She has gone away for a few days."

"And why do you look at me like that?"

"Like what, monsieur?" But he dropped his eyes. As James Hopley's face was then he had reason.

"As you are looking. As that young workman looked. As M. le curé looked. As the doctors looked when I was ill." "I, monsieur? If I am lacking in respect for monsieur—"

"Do you mean that I am changed?"

They were still face to face in the doorway, one inside the room, the other out. Suddenly Marsac stood aside for James to enter. He spoke soothingly.

"As I was unpacking this morning I found a folding bed. I will put it into the room downstairs. The summer is getting late. At night there is a nip in the air."

"That is not answering my questions."

"As monsieur says, he has been ill. First I will get a clothes-brush to remove that dust. Then I will set out a glass of wine downstairs."

"Get the wine," said James Hopley, abruptly turning his back.

But half an hour later, downstairs with the bottle of wine in front of him, and a glass of it already swallowed, he was able to take charge of his thoughts again. Marsac was fussing over him, making excuses

to come in and out, and after the second glass James became as politic as he had recently been unnerved. Marsac was closing a placard. James spoke to him in conciliatory tones.

"I did not know that Madame Marsac was not well."

Marsac replied that it was nothing, a slight *crise de nerfs*. He was used to it in Madame.

"Is it that the château does not suit her?"

"We cannot all pick and choose where we live. It may be so. She is from a town, from Rouen."

"Then after Rouen she finds this . . . ?"

"What, monsieur?"

"Come," said James Hopley with sudden friendliness. "This château is a very old place. Many people have lived and died here. When many people have lived and died in a place it is—it is as a place is when many people have lived and died there."

Marsac's knotted hands were twisting his red baize apron. He looked up. "Monsieur is speaking of the health of Madame?"

"Naturally. And of the château."

"Monsieur has then heard some rumour?"

"It may be rumour. It is that that I am asking you. Come, Marsac, be frank. If this place was not agreeable to me I would tell you. Does a room need air? Then give it air. It is cold and not as other rooms? Then choose a different one. I am content with the room I am in. Sit down."

But the caretaker preferred to stand. He nodded assentingly, however, at James's words. He, too, had no time for *des riens*, he said. How many rooms were there, except those built yesterday, in which somebody had not died? Did it matter how they died? One can but die. It was not dying, but living that Marsac found difficult.

"So this room I am sleeping in . . . ?"

With that Marsac's tongue was loosed and he told the story without further ado.

"Since monsieur takes so rational a view of it, and as my grandfather told the story . . . yes," he said. "At one time this place was notorious for smuggling. Monsieur will not have noticed, but I can show him places where the floors have been cut through, to allow the pulley at the top of the house to be used for the well in the cellars below. There were trap-doors, and they stored the bales in the well. Rather than be taken one man—he is known still as Jean the Smuggler—tried to hang himself. The rope broke, the trap-door gave way under his weight, and he fell through into monsieur's room. Nothing can be seen, however, as the ceiling has since been plastered many times."

James Hopley did not often smile, but his face gave one of its twitches now. Always "the ceiling had been plastered over"—always there was the gap between the event and the first record of it. And what were the next record, and the next, and the next, but so many successive plasterings? Stones were never very long in place before the legends began to follow. So why begin with Arcques? According to the curé, portions of the foundations went back centuries before then. It amused James to make little trimmings of his own to the château's history.

"At least this poor fellow had a struggle for his life!"

"One's life is one's life. Doubtless one struggles."

"No doubt after a flight across the fields, hiding under the haystacks and taking shelter in the ditches?"

"It is probable that to get to the château he would cross fields. He is said to have swum the river. I myself remember one place that few would pass alone after dark."

"Because of this *suicide*?"

"One supposes so. But there are some who will believe anything."

"All the same these things make history."

Marsac gave a shrug. "As I say, one can but die once. Perhaps it is well. And with Madame away I have the work of two to do. Monsieur will not let me make up the bed for him downstairs?"

"I am very well where I am."

"I will ask the men about the chimney. It will then be possible to have a fire upstairs," and Marsac shuffled off to his own quarters. James Hopley filled his glass again.

One can but die! Now who had told the excellent Marsac that? And the legend of the smuggler who had come through the ceiling of his room! What tomfoolery would they be talking next? And as it was not a joke he could share with the first-comer he shared it with his *cahier* that night.

There is in fact one passage he wrote that had better be transcribed exactly as he wrote it, lest another pen should seem to have misinterpreted him. It is the first clear indication we have of the lengths to which this ingrowing mind of his was prepared to go. He writes, in cold ink:

"Since that visit of mine to the top of the house this afternoon I am at least face to face with something real. But as for 'A man can but die,' who except Marsac says so? If all who ever lived are completely dead what is all the talk about? Since the world began has no man ever been *partially* dead? Never? It seems to me a good deal to say. I am not thinking of Lazarus. Unless he was wholly dead there was no miracle. And I am leaving out Translation, for these 'were

not' and death does not enter into it. But say that a few exist in this residual and partial state. On what level do these manifest, and to whom? Assuredly to somebody they meet on the same level. So take such a man as I am, neither one thing nor the other. I am, as you might say, either death warmed up or life cooled down. In that case there is only a margin of difference between him, scarcely dead, and me, scarcely alive. He is as much a man as I, I as much a ghost as he. For all I know I am in the direct line of succession. It is merely that in that case I should like to know. And by the way, a rather curious thing has occurred to me. A set of words has been running in my head for this last hour that I have not the faintest recollection of having heard before. Textually they are the same every time they come, and they do not strike one as an accidental jingle. They are: *The Past was the Best, the Present is Worse, the Worst is to Come*. Needless to say I haven't invented them, and they seem to come from a very, very long way off. Where?"

So here was a man, calmly arguing, and with a certain show of logic, the possibility of becoming a ghost himself. If (he seems to have asked) this Jean the Smuggler had been preceded by a spectre from the Terror, and that by an invisible shape from Arcques, and the Arcques phantom by a dim line of others, why should the Ghostage stop there? As for his quotation, that indeed is slightly puzzling. Very few fragments of this ancient Maya philosophy remain, and such as there are are not likely to have come James Hopley's way. But somehow the words, coming like the phantoms out of abysses of time, add a credit to his other speculations.

But with all his logic he had forgotten one thing. This was that ghosts do not appoint themselves. It is still the consensus of human tongues that makes the ghost, and in the end all came back, not to James, but to the men and women of the neighbourhood.

As usually happens, it was pure accident that brought this to a head, on the Sunday after his arrival at the château. So far he had taken his walks within the limits of the château's own lands, and he ought to have known that he was taking risks in venturing farther abroad on the day when the masons and carpenters rested from their work of the week. But it was a tempting day for a stroll, and he happened to find himself at a dilapidated postern with fields of wheat and half-cut lucerne beyond that rose up a small hill. There was nobody about, nor unless an unseen cock crowed, any sign of life to be seen, and passing out of the postern he began the ascent of the hill.

And a man may commune with a rope about the vileness of man and the things he does on earth, but he cannot see the wheat waving



over its poppies and cornflowers, nor the humble thyme and bedstraw and rest-harrow that make a world of dowdy beauty of the stubble, and remain altogether unmoved in heart. Acute noises of busy insects sounded in James Hopley's ears, the quick eyes of a bird looked into his for a moment, and close to his foot a clod stirred that was a hedgehog. And for all he knew he might be looking at it for the last time. Something came into his throat. This was all of life he would really miss. There had indeed been a time . . . but what was time to all this untrammelled homeliness? The speck of an insect settling on his hand: its momentary agony were he to destroy it would be as long as any agony James Hopley had endured, but its joy in the glowing minutes of the sun was as long. It was endless as those kisses women gave to all men but to him, seeming to keep them alive for ever during the unmeasured minute their eyelids dropped and quivered. O, if a man could but have had the floweriness and the love and put all the fiendishness away! And in that very moment he found himself at the top of the hill, looking down the other slope of it. The slender spire of the church rose against the next hillside, and past it the road straggled among the compact farms. But there was also something else going on. In a small field just this side of the church the people of the village seemed to have been spilt together in a little hollow as if out of a scoop. Marsac had said nothing to James Hopley about a *fête*, but there it was, in full progress. Half a dozen canvas booths had been set up, with tiny flags and gay banners of bunting. Rustic games were in full swing, and the short crack of airguns wherē the boys shot for tinsel prizes, and he could distinguish the curé, short and black in his soutane, moving among the mothers and marshalling the children for their short races. A hedge surrounded the field. It was pure hunger of heart that made James long to draw a little nearer. If he liked to use the slight shoulder of the hill as cover he might be able to do so unseen. Cautiously he descended, and presently, standing in a dry ditch with foxgloves and cow-parsley up to his knees, was peering through a gap.

Almost the first thing he saw seemed to have been put there specially for him. On a fluttering strip of homely unsized calico, the home-made letters all blurred, he read: "*Anciens Combattants de la Guerre.*" There with their half-legs and sticks and empty sleeves and war-medals they moved about, and God knows they could have had James' English one-pound note had anybody told him of the occasion. But these were decent mutilations, mutilations that made a man hold his head up and brought him honour among his friends and the awed regard of their children. James, putting the tangle of convolvulus aside with his hand, could only stand there out of sight, looking on.

He never knew whose eyes had been the first to see him. By ill-luck it was a child who suddenly screamed. And though an instant later James Hopley was no longer there a mother was already at the child's side. Other mothers, too, had come up and were gently shaking the child, demanding what it had seen to terrify it. But the child could only sob and gulp and cling to its mother. By that time James, no longer thinking of concealment, was walking with downhung head and hands before his face up the hill again. Once he turned. Down in the field he saw them as they watched him, hands that pointed him out. One urchin had lifted a toy gun to his shoulder and James heard the minute crack. Where the stooks began he dropped behind them out of sight. Below him he saw the broken postern he had come out by. Better if he had remained on the other side of it.

For men might understand and grant that after all war was like that, and women always had their men behind them, but let James Hopley come unawares upon a child and its father and mother alike turned on him eyes that blazed. Had this accursed *mutilé* then not the decency to stay within doors? Must he stare even at children so that his dreadful visage haunted them at night? Who was he, this corpse that Madame had sent here to die? He who prowled about the château after dark, so that even good Mathilde Marsac would not stay a day longer in the place? Where was Mathilde? Run and get her! She was the one to question the child; poor little Léonie, she could not tell her own mother, but she would tell Mathilde, who had come over just the same way herself. "Francis! Charles! You saw the foreigner, the English *gueule cassée*; tell us what kind he is, this animal who frightens children!"

And Francis the mason was able to say that he had looked through a window-piercing into the corridor, and it was well the ladder had been secured at the top or he and the ladder must have come down together, such a glaring face had this stranger turned on him. And Charles could tell them more than that, for he had seen him in his room, dressing himself, putting his face on, for that, *bien sur*, was not the face he slept in, but another, that he took off and put on the bedside commode before he hid himself under the sheets. But a third had presently left that far behind. This Englishman, this horror, he said, had a glass eye, which God knows does sometimes happen to a *copain* in a war without anybody thinking the worse of him, but he does not get a malevolent soul in the war too. Not only had he a glass eye, *ce cadavre*, but he played devil's tricks with it. Let them ask Jacques Martin when he returned! Jacques would tell them how he had met this miserable three days ago down by the river, at a certain spot they knew of . . . yes, the selfsame spot. He had been under

the alders, just as he had hidden under the hedge to frighten the child. And Jacques himself had seen him take out the glass eye and polish it with a handkerchief and put it back into its socket again, and then he had screwed up the other eye, pretending to take that out and polish it too, and had glared at Jacques with them both. What did Jacques do? You may well ask! He looked round for the nearest billet of wood. But before he could find one he had gone, this English miscreant . . . gone and not to be found, though Jacques had shaken every bush round about for half an hour. As for him, who spoke, he wished that somebody would write a letter to Madame in Paris, telling her she must remove her *revenant* or get somebody else to wheel her barrows. When Madame bought people's labour she did not buy their nerves too. Mon Dieu, he wanted a cognac now, the turn Jacques Martin's story had given him . . .

So the workmen retired to the inn, there to discuss their relations with Madame Blanche; but James Hopley sat among his tapestries and porcelain vases, his spirit broken. What was the world but a place where little girls had fits at the sight of him and youngsters of ten pointed their toy guns at him? *Anciens Combattants de la Guerre!* It was time to make room. He saw by Marsac's face when he came in that what had happened had already got round to him. And Marsac now had not even the excuse that he had his wife to look after, but he merely brought in James' supper, saw to it that he had a good fire, and left him again. Drawing near to the fire-dogs and stretching out his hands as if they had been cold and stiff already, James Hopley did not even write in his book.

## 6

Whenever James Hopley looked back on those days of 1916 he looked back on a world of men each with a face and name and rank and regimental number and a separate history of his own. And that had been a good time to know a man in, for you had learned more about him in half an hour than in all the years since the Armistice. But in this harmonic repetition of it all every one of these trifling, all-important things was missing. He had now spent four nights in that Hôtel Drouot room upstairs, knowing with a certainty that had increased every night *what* this roomfellow of his was, but without getting an inch nearer to knowing *who*. He sat long that night over the fire. The flames seemed to make the stiff figures of the tapestries

start softly forward and retire again, they gave a dim life and motion to the battlepiece that was big enough for a wall at Versailles, but no friendly face started forth out of the fire to look at James himself. Curse the fellow! James had done his utmost to make himself known to him; why couldn't he have done the same? If James had been through that storm of khaki and flame and gas and mud and chloride-of-lime once he could go through it again, but he would not do so alone. He would have a pal with him the next time. Well, there was another chance to-night. Perhaps his pal would have changed his mind. Sluggishly he rose.

His pal had changed his mind. Throughout that night the second bed remained unvisited. In the room itself nothing whatever happened. James lay awake till the first streaks of daylight. Then, exhausted, he fell into a doze.

But he was roused by a rude enough shock an hour or so later. There was a shattering of glass. Something rolled across the floor and came to rest. Turning his head on his pillow James saw that it was a stone. They were going to stone him out of the château now.

And what was he going to do about that? There had been a time when he wouldn't have had to ask himself. The whole village could have gone to the devil before he would have budged. There were plenty of ways in which he could have retaliated. But what was the good? It wasn't the hostility of the village that mattered. It was this utter, heartbreaking failure of the night. Yet where in this shadowy business had he miscalculated? He went over it all again, but could not find that anywhere he had made a mistake. Was then some presumption being punished in him? Some sin? He asks himself, searching his heart.

*"I cannot see what great wrong I have ever done in my life. Looking back on it I have a thousand meannesses and petty acts to beg forgiveness for, but it hasn't been an important enough life for a big sin. Not even important enough for big suffering either, for this is not true suffering. There is a gallantry in defying anguish, but this is only wincing under the blow when it comes and waiting for the next. I had hoped for something a little braver. I would have stood up to it, gone out to meet it. Next Wednesday was to have been the crux. And I have one more night. If nothing happens I shall feel like . . ."*

But what he would feel like in that case is heavily scored out. Again he quotes his bit of Maya about the Best and the Worst, and within a couple of hours is writing:

*"And now Marsac is leaving me. He has just told me so. I told him he couldn't just step out like that but would at least have to find me somebody else, but he shook his head. Nobody else would come. But he has consented to stay another week. Then in my place he would go too, he says. In my place! . . . Am suddenly interrupted. Here comes the curé along the terrace."*

But this time he was not the amiable *curé* who had come to ask after Madame Blanche in Paris and to invite James to come and stay with him at the vicarage. He had his most unyielding clerical face on, so much so that not ten minutes had passed before he was asking James whether he would not like to pray.

"To pray? Why?" James asked.

The *curé* looked him resolutely in the face. "Have you no enemies?"

With that James answered the *curé* in his own tone.—"None who have not made themselves so."

"Is it likely the whole village is wrong?"

"Must I pray for the man who threw a stone through my window this morning?"

The *curé* frowned as he turned his little silver cross in his fingers. The throwing of the stone was evidently news to him, for he dropped a little of his austerity.

"It is as I said. This air is not suitable for you. It is best to speak plainly as to the terrible thing that has happened to you. For your physical hurt, so much worse (believe me) in this short time, there is, alas, no doctor. If they have done all they can for you in Paris it is the will of God. But if your soul is sick there is always prayer. Will you kneel with me?"

"So the village says my soul is sick too?"

"I must close my ears if you boast of your own righteousness."

"If then my soul is sick should we be praying the same prayer, to the same God?"

"My prayer and my God will prevail."

"Enough. I will not kneel with you."

The *curé* became austere again.—"Monsieur, you come here and in less than a week you are troubling my flock. Already it is said of you that if the earth swallowed you it was as it closed upon Dathan and Abiram, who went down quick into the pit. But the incense of God, whose priest I am, rose between the dead and the living. Again I ask you to pray."

"I live my life alone. I will pray for what is left of it alone."

"Surely our own *Anciens Combattants* should sympathise and

understand?"

"What do they say?"

"That where already a fear was you make it visible. I, I have the protection of my Cross," he turned it in his fingers again, "but if others think you are the Devil I cannot be the shepherd of my flock without entering into their thoughts."

Suddenly, too exhausted for further disputation, James dropped heavily into a chair. It was precisely as he had thought. This *curé* had his middle course between two worlds to steer. Well, let them have it their own way. He closed his eyes.

"I am sure you meant kindly in coming, monsieur."

"It was my duty. Your case shall be pleaded with them too. At least no more stones shall be thrown. Since you will not pray with me I will pray for you alone."

But he spoke to the air. James was asleep. When he opened his eyes again the *curé* had gone.

But during that short interval of forgetfulness James had had a curious dream. He had dreamed that he was upstairs in his room, packing his bags to return to Paris. With the manifestations cut abruptly off, what was there left to stay for? Marsac had advised him to go. The *curé* told him plainly that he was looked on as the Devil and a fear made visible. So he was packing up to leave it all.

But as in his dream he moved about his bedroom he suddenly found himself looking for his water-bottle. Somehow his familiar civilian attire had changed itself into articles of wartime equipment. There they lay spread out on the second bed, his greatcoat, his haversack, his intrenching-tool, his tin hat, his gas-mask. Looking down at himself he saw the puttees on his legs, his stained knees, the skirts of his frayed tunic. His revolver was in the holster at his waist, the breach of his rifle was oiled, the piece of rag was tied over its muzzle. His ten-days' leave was up. Waterloc, the night train and the escorted crossing. Where the devil was that water-bottle? There was something stronger than water in it. Ah, there it was, on the alabaster-topped washstand; fool that he was, it wasn't his water-bottle but his gas-mask that he had lost. It had been on the second bed there only a moment ago. Curse things for getting lost like this, and him in a hurry with the boat-train to catch . . .

And suddenly in his dream he was standing before the gilded glass above his mantelpiece, staring at himself. He might well look for his mask; he had it on all the time. Christ, what a picture of all-hell it was with its goggles and its swine's snout, its offal-like windpipe re-entering his own entrails, its integument tucked like putrid wrinkled flesh into his collar . . .

And all at once he gulped as if a hand had closed hard on his heart. That that he was looking at was not the mask. It was his face. He woke with a cry.

It was small wonder he frightened the village if even in a dream he could frighten himself. Fear made visible? But he was angry now. What fear? Why, the fear they had always had, the rats! The fear that they were bold to laugh at in the daytime, but that at nightfall drew them close together in the inn, to tell one another over their cognac that it took more than a shadow to frighten them. But because they *did* fear the shadow they cast about to give it a substance, and in James they found one ready-made and to hand. Within a week he was no less a personage than the Devil himself. And at the thought of this there smote through the dun clouds that enveloped James's mind a piercing, dazzling ray. The Devil? *He*? Why, if they thought that, then it was in his power to *be* the Devil! Suddenly he laughed out-right. Wretched little souls without imagination, who wanted all but the picturesquely wounded to take themselves out of sight so that they might be able to talk with a better conscience about the glorious past and the heritage their fathers had died for! At least the rope had told leaner, starker truth than that! He had turned and run from it before. Would he turn and run from it now?

And that non-appearance of the night before: what had ailed James that he had looked on *that* as a calamity? Was it not in truth the very opposite? What had become of James's theory of first and second times if it applied to appearances *and not to non-appearances also*? Suddenly he exulted. That first night of unsupported loneliness had been sent to test him. It had been sent to try whether he was yet goblin enough to stand alone. And he had stood alone. His very face was now hardly recognisable as a face, and it had been as much as the *curé* had been able to do to look at it without blenching. A fear made visible? He broke into a peal of laughter that startled himself and ended abruptly. Give James a *second* night of tranquillity and the ghost in him would be marvellously strong. No threadbare story of Jean the Smuggler, but he, James Hopley and the Devil they attributed to him, would be the unsettling of the *curé's* flock. Oh, let *no* chill or smell or breathing come to-night to mar the rich perfection of it! He was eager to begin that deep, dreamless sleep at once.

That night he went to bed supperless and slept like the dead.

## 7

As a small child, just before they drew his nursery curtains late in the afternoon, James Hopley had sometimes stood at the window, looking at the mimic fire that had seemed to burn in mid-air outside, magically and all by itself. People in the street seemed to walk through it unscathed, and young James himself had only had to take a step this way or that and out the fire had gone altogether. It had of course been only the reflection of the fire in the room, and yet to James its reality had been such that the illusion had stuck with him through life. He had of course had different names for it at different times. At one time he had called it ambition, but he had never been equipped for that, and ambition hadn't lasted very long. Then he had known it by the name of love, and had wondered that others didn't stop to warm their hands at this wonderful thing of his too, till one day one of them had, and out that had gone too. And he had called it knowledge, and pleasure, and a number of other things, and now he was wondering what form it was going to take next. He had also been counting up how many pages remained in his *cahier*, for it was his intention to go on writing to the very last moment. There were fifteen of them, and his normal handwriting was on the small side. Fifteen should be enough, and as he looked on the blank pages he wondered what would be found on them at that time to-morrow.

He had arrived at the château on a Wednesday, and at six o'clock on the following Tuesday afternoon he was watching the workmen depart. One or two of them glanced backwards over their shoulders, but James kept out of their sight, by a tall onyx lamp near the fireplace. Then, when the last of them had disappeared, he took a walk round Blanche's domain. His senses were more than ordinarily sharpened, his single eye was as alert as if he had been making a final inspection of the property before taking possession of it. He noted what a great deal of work still remained to be done. The old orchard there would have to be grubbed up and replanted, the cleaning out of the choked moat would take weeks yet, summers must pass before the gardens took on orderliness, scores of summers before the restored portions of the building began to assimilate with the older work. But assimilate in time they would, and it would be an odd thing now if James Hopley had no part at all in the place that was to be. There was at least one little girl in the village who, become a grandmother, would be able to tell how, in broad daylight, the château's spectre had mopped and mowed at her through a hedge, giving such a turn to her thoughts that they had never really got over it, and an aged man by a fire-side



would nod gravely and say that that was quite true, for he himself had seen it too, half way up the hill behind the church there, and had pointed a gun at it, and it had fled.

The sun was going redly down behind the scaffold-poles. It dyed the new chimney-stack rose-pink, and presently, when the empty window-holes were glazed, they would fling back the gold too. It was a short life at the best, and when the hour came it shrank to such a small handful of days as to make one wonder what it had all been about. And suddenly, like an announcement of that hour, a bell with a curiously harsh iron clang broke in on his thoughts. Now where had that bell come from? That was new. Was it something else that Blanche had picked up at the Hôtel Drouot? Probably, and Marsac, unable to find him in the house, was telling him supper was ready. He had a feeling that Marsac ought to provide a rather special supper that night. Slowly he ascended the steps to the terrace.

As all Blanche's friends know, she did not move into that château on the following spring. To the dismay of the men of the village, but also as a final confirmation had one been needed, the work was discontinued abruptly, and in the Paris newspapers an advertisement appeared, that a Henri Quatre château, partly furnished and needing only a little restoration, was for sale, no reasonable offer refused and possession at purchaser's own convenience. No tenant has yet concluded the bargain. Several have been down to visit the property, which now has not even a caretaker, and the last applicant, a wealthy man in the motor business, was buttonholed on his way back to his car by a bald, bearded, elderly man, who said that his name was Marsac, that he lived in the little shack behind the inn, could tell monsieur such and such things about the château, and for the rest did such odd jobs as were to be had while his wife looked after the young children of the women who worked in the fields. What passed between Marsac and the motor-magnate is not known, but the car drove away and has not been seen since.

So things draw to a close of themselves. One persists in giving his account of the affair, another his, and so on, but when it is all weighed up those *cahiers* of James Hopley's are the only direct testimony that remains, a stop-watch record of what passed, set down in the moment of its passing. They are written in pencil, apparently as he sat up in bed. His first entry is timed 11.30, with all still outside and all quiet in the gilt and alabaster room. His pulse was normal, his breathing easy, and he had not drunk any wine. In these circumstances his personal narrative ends and the new legend begins.

"11.45 . . . Nothing yet, but it is still early. Am writing to kill

time as I wait. Of course that was all nonsense about taking my revenge by haunting these poor people. I have other things to think about now. But I don't think I should care to be the curé of a place like this, though I expect that about Dathan and Abiram came from Madame Marsac. She has that sort of look now I come to think of it. Poor Marsac! He's taken this rather badly. I could see he was in two minds about giving notice. He didn't want to stay but he didn't want to go either. Quite a bond between us in exactly one week. I shall remember Marsac. That is if one does remember these things afterwards."

"12.15 . . . Still nothing, but wonder what's just brought Tommy Allinson into my head. He got his at Loos. But he got it clean and quick, not like me and this other chap. You don't have relapses years afterwards and go into a clinic when you've been drilled through the head. Funny I can remember Tommy's name and any number of other names but not this fellow's. Always on the tip of my tongue. Some name like Hobbs. Briggs. Crabbe. A tough devil he was anyway, pinned in the darkness under that beam like that. Still breathing when they got him out; gave a shriek, I remember, and that hour before they came for me seemed longer than all the rest put together. Australian, sergeant, Fifth Division. Afterwards at Horseferry Road they thought I was loopy, asking for a man and knowing no more who than that, no name, no number, no unit, nothing. But they were tough, all those Aussies. That night-raid when they blackened their faces and put cogwheels and bits of iron on pick-handles. In the trench that other time, when they found a whole section of them dead with women's underclothes on. Didn't he come from Brisbane now? Hell, why didn't I think of that before? Big husky chap, scar over right eye, swore like blazes and came from Brisbane. Why didn't I tell them that at Horseferry Road? Higgs. Biggs. Some short name."

"12.30 . . . Keep looking up at the trapdoor Marsac says they've plastered up. But I know he's not always punctual to the tick. Wait. What's that? Thought I heard something. Whee-e-e-o-o-o-ooo-bump! It's nothing. Only Jerry waking up. Half an hour and he'll stop. You can set your watch by Jerry. Worth a quid to see what we're doing to him when it's our turn. Something pretty dirty a fellow who managed to get away told me. Wait a bit though . . . that was something upstairs . . ."

"12.55." . . . (Note: this entry consists of the hour only.)

"1.30 . . . Can't say I'm sorry that's over. Hell, but it was good and solid on top of us that time! The other must have been the last lot of earth settling. Why can't it stop where it's put instead

*of shifting and rumbling to itself like a man's belly? That get you any, digger? Don't like his being so quiet. There's something pushing against my right foot that wasn't there before. First you can't move, then it loosens up, and you're afraid to lift a finger. Christ, that bastard's woke up. He's at it again. Hell, give it a rest, man. Am I on a bloody feather-bed either? Something crawling over your face? They don't charge you anything extra for that. I haven't got any legs that I can feel. Day or night? How in the goddamn blazes do I know? What do you think I am, a sundial? Stop it or you'll start another bloody vibration or something. Phoo, you stink, or somebody does! Any more of us here? Same old smell, boys, good for you, doesn't make you think too much of yourself. For the love of God stop it, man! Listen, that was picks. Shovels. Voices. I heard 'em . . . damn you, I tell you I heard 'em! Oh my God, he's stopped! Passed out this time I guess. Are you there? You . . . what's your name . . . you from Botany Bay . . ."*

*"2.5 . . . That thing by my right leg's a box of some kind. Just managed to get my hand down to it. Anyway it's wood; iron's colder. Ammunition-box, perhaps, with the rope handle come loose. Stop. This is getting exciting. There's too much of it for an ammunition-box. Perhaps an end of broken waggon with a trace on it. Never know what you find when a dump blows up. Yards of it! Wonder if I could work an end over to him and tell him to make it fast to the timber. Hi, cobber, are you awake? Got a hand loose? There's a rope here. A rope, man, do you hear? Lots of it. Then get your hands free and scratch a way out. A rope end coming over . . . no hurry . . . haul in and try again . . . we've all the time there is . . ."*

*"2.15 . . . This is queer. The place has got all turned round and there's a light and I can see. Where did that candle come from? What am I doing in bed? Don't you begin seeing things that aren't there, my son, or you're done. You've been blown up. Two beds mean you're seeing double, and bedrooms don't stink like this. No, making it fast to the beam's no good. Wants a dead prise-up with a lever, shall be crushing the poor devil to pulp if I begin to haul. He's dead off again now. Off for good if he's lucky. You have ten minutes' nap, digger. Do you all the good in the world, as Bianche says. I was a rotten swine to wake you up that afternoon; regular dog in the manger, didn't want the bed myself and wouldn't let you have it. Let a man sleep when he can. Sleep himself right off the map. Go out like a candle. Funny place this, a candle one minute and not the next. And that candle's nearly out. Better put another one in . . ."*

He didn't need those fifteen pages after all. Indeed his closing words are in a scrawl so agitated that something dire must have happened. One conjecture is that in putting in the new candle he upset the candlestick on the other bed, scaring this companion of his away; there is in fact a small trace of wax, on the counterpane, though no scorching. The *cahier* was found the next morning face downwards on the floor between the beds, the one tossed, the other as smooth as if it had been newly made. It ends almost illegibly, with the words scattered all over the page.

"Damnation quiet he stirred no he's only turned over wait no he's getting up the door listen I've found a rope the Past the Present to Come wait wait . . ."

There was one point of the roof-gutter that the plank cradle did not quite reach, but Francis the mason thought that by lashing it to the nearest point of the scaffolding he could cant it sufficiently and so save himself the trouble of setting it up anew. He called to Marsac, who was passing below.

"Marsac! Have you a rope handy?"

"Descend by the ladder and get in at the window-piercing. You will find one in the rafters there," and he passed on to prepare M. Hopley's coffee. Francis descended and scrambled through the aperture.

He found the rope, or what was left of it, for it was newly broken. Francis looked up at the centre rafter, where it had jumped from the sheave of the pulley and jammed, and then down at the unboarded floor. There below he saw the rest of it, but it was attached to something. The something wore a pair of pyjamas, and its feet were bare. Francis fled.

In his own quarters Marsac was pouring boiling water into a metal jug. He looked round as Francis the mason entered.

"You found the rope?"

But the young mason could only stammer . . . "Yes . . . and you . . . in the night . . . you heard nothing?"

At something in his tone Marsac's bearded face too had turned the colour of butcher's fat on a slab . . . "What? Heard what?"

"The *gueule cassée* . . . *suicidé* . . . *il s'est pendu* . . . it is the work of Jean the Smuggler . . . he does not do it himself . . . always he makes them do it . . . go and see . . ."

But at that moment the door at the foot of the back stairs swung slowly, silently, emptily open. And Jean the Smuggler was apparition enough for Francis the mason, but not for Henri Marsac. Suddenly the caretaker gave a harsh cry, as his wife had done before him.

The jug of M. Hopley's morning coffee was still in his hand. All at once he hurled it across the apartment full into the vacant doorway, as before he had almost thrown a lighted lamp. Then he fell in a heap across a chair, and lay there shuddering. The metal pot crashed against the edge of the open door and fell to the floor. Slowly what was left of the coffee spread out in an irregular pool about it. "I shall remember Marsac," James Hopley had written. He had remembered him.



## T.E.D. KLEIN

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### Nadelman's God

*To many people T.E.D. Klein (b.1947) burst upon the horror scene in 1984 with the publication of his novel The Ceremonies which became a bestseller and won the British Fantasy Award for Best Novel. To devotees of weird fiction, however, Ted Klein had for a long time been a much respected authority in the genre. The majority of his work had been published in the small press magazines, with little of it escaping to the wider reading world. One of these early stories, 'The Events at Poroth Farm' (1972)—which in fact forms the basis for The Ceremonies—was selected by Richard Davis as one of that year's best horror stories. Over the next few years, when the mood took him, Klein would produce the occasional odd story such as 'Petey' (1979), the much acclaimed Lovecraftian story 'Black Man With a Horn' (1980) and the even more acclaimed 'Children of the Kingdom' (1980). These stories finally found their way into his first collection Dark Gods (1985) which included a new story 'Nadelman's God'. That went on to win the World Fantasy Award in 1986 for the Best Novella. Need I say more.*

Nadelman would never forget the first witch he'd ever met.

It had been on a drizzly Thursday evening in November in the early 1970s, in an S & M club called the Chateau 21. The club was in the basement of a brownstone on West Twenty-first Street, just below one of the Chelsea area's oldest occult book-shops. Upstairs you could buy paperbacks by people with names like Ashtoreth Grove and Dr. Hermes Fortune, along with crystal-ball keychains, Tarot decks, knives with hairy goat's-foot handles, and little wax figurines in the shape of satyrs. Downstairs had been turned into a barroom, complete with black velvet drapes, wrought-iron candle sconces, and a wall mural depicting a lushly bosomed blonde stretched over an altar. On weekends the place doubled as a classroom for self-hypnosis seminars and aura readings, and on Mondays a group from New Jersey held séances there.

Nadelman and the woman who would later become his wife had taken the subway in from Brooklyn that night in a spirit of adventure, Nadelman dressed in a leather bomber jacket he hadn't worn since college, Rhoda wearing the uncomfortable-looking black leather pants that had caught his eye the day she'd first shown up in them at the ad agency. Normally the Chateau was closed to nonmembers, but Thursday night, they'd read in the *Voice*, was open house, when outsiders were welcome to check out the goings-on. Admission was twelve dollars for men, free for women.

Even at that disparate rate, nearly all the customers were men. Most of them appeared to be out-of-town businessmen in search of pickups or simply someone to talk to, perhaps just a good story to bring back to St. Paul. In the dim light they looked lost and faintly embarrassed. There were only half a dozen women in the room, including a homely girl with a flat, pock-marked face who strolled among the drinkers in nothing but black panties, a somewhat dazed smile, and a pair of heavy chains fastened in an X across her sad, sagging little breasts. Imprinted on her left cheek was an upside-down five-pointed star, dark as if freshly branded, though Nadelman was sure it was just Magic Marker.

The room itself reminded him of someone's furnished basement. There was nothing to eat but pretzel nuggets in little tin bowls on the bar, and nothing to drink but cans of beer which the bartender fished from a grey plastic garbage can full of ice chunks swimming in dirty water. Several feet away a plump middle-aged man draped himself clumsily over a bar stool, dropped his pants, and was sparked by a negress as large as a linebacker. The businessmen averted their eyes and looked preoccupied, but the sound of the slaps remained audible throughout the room, even above the heavy-metal music that



blared from a speaker in the corner.

The witch was standing by the opposite wall, Budweiser in hand, beside a pile of crumpled empties on the floor. With a beer belly bulging over faded jeans, a T-shirt with the picture of a leering skull beneath the words KILL 'EM ALL-LET GOD SORT 'EM OUT!, and a day's growth of beard darkening into a hairy chest, he didn't look at all like a witch. In fact, he looked more like a Hell's Angel. He was talking to a small, stocky red-haired woman, jerking his head up and down to emphasize a point, and even from across the room Nadelman could see something glinting in the lobe of his left ear. The seventies were still young and Nadelman not widely traveled; this was the first man he'd ever seen wearing an earring, outside of a pirate movie.

As Nadelman watched, the man downed the last of his beer, crushed the can with a casual squeeze of his hand, and dropped it into the pile at his feet with the absent-minded propriety of a diner tossing down a crumpled napkin. Encircling the redhead's waist, he began walking with her toward the bar, pushing one of the businessmen out of the way with a hard shove of his shoulder. Moments later Nadelman saw them pause and greet the girl with the chains across her chest. She nodded to them familiarly, breasts thrust out for their inspection, a celebrity acknowledging her peers. As she strutted off, the man turned to his woman and shouted something in her ear. Both grinned, the woman with evident distaste, and then they were lost amid the crowd of drinkers.

Nadelman leaned his body against the beer-stained wood of the bar and wondered if it was time to leave. Though he was pleased with himself for having actually ventured into an honest-to-god S & M club, the place saddened and depressed him. Rhoda, seated beside him—as the best-looking woman there she had managed to secure one of the few bar stools—looked up from her drink. “Do you think it gets any livelier than this?”

“Yeah, at the end of the evening they squirt seltzer at us.”

“I wouldn't mind if they did. These pants are hot.”

“Hiya, hotpants!” said a boozy voice. Nadelman felt himself jostled from behind and turned to see the slob in the T-shirt grinning at Rhoda, his arm still wrapped around the redhead's waist.

Nadelman leaned toward him, feeling his own quota of beers pumping fizzily through his head. “I'm afraid I didn't catch your name.”

The other stuck out a hand, which Nadelman reached for until he saw that it was still clutching a Bud. “Lenny,” the man said. “I was just admiring your lady's outfit there.” He gestured with the beer toward Rhoda's legs.

Nadelman forced a smile. "And I was just admiring your earring," he said, nodding toward the bit of silver that gleamed in the other's left ear. It was a tiny version of the shape he'd seen earlier, a five-pointed star turned upside-down. The redhead, he saw now, was wearing a duplicate of it. "Nice," he added. "Awfully nice workmanship."

"It fuckin' well oughta be," Lenny said, with grumpy pride. "There's only nine like it in the entire world. Me and Tina here know the artist who made 'em." He reached up and touched the earring in a curiously girlish gesture. Nadelman noticed that the back of his hand bore a tattoo of a similar design.

"Does that star have some special significance?"

The man's brows lowered menacingly. "Some special *what*?"

"I mean, is it some kind of symbol?"

Tina gave her companion a questioning glance, while he in turn eyed Nadelman and his girlfriend up and down, as if deciding whether they could be trusted. "Yeah," he said at last, "it's a symbol all right—the symbol of our coven. You know what a coven is, pal?"

"Sure," said Nadelman, on firm ground. Years before, in his sophomore year at college, he had gone on an occult kick, reading everything from John Dee to von Däniken. "It's like a congregation of witches."

"Not bad," said Lenny. Tina nodded approvingly.

"And that's what me and Lenny are," she said.

"You're witches?" Nadelman tried to keep a straight face. Beside him he heard Rhoda giggle.

"You got it, pal," said Lenny. He scratched his belly as Tina draped an arm around his thick shoulders. "It ain't like you're probably thinking though. I mean, we've not into sacrificing babies and shit like that."

Tina chuckled. "We just do our thing, you know? Live and let live, that's our motto."

"Oh, of *course*," Nadelman nodded strenuously, the way he always did when he was around crazy, possibly dangerous people bigger than himself. Lenny looked well-muscled, the kind of guy who lifted weights in his basement or hefted a lot of tire irons as he worked on his car; or maybe he was just the sort of lower-class type who seems born with muscular, hairy arms, the way smart people are born with bad eyesight.

Rhoda spoke up, a little more emphatically than usual thanks to the drinks in her. "*She's* the witch, right?" She nodded at Tina. "But you yourself would be—what? A warlock? A wizard?"

Lenny shook his head. "Uh-uh," he said, "that's just a lot of bullshit people believe. A witch can be a man *or* a woman. Warlocks—" He

made a face. "That's a whole 'nother bag. Those dudes are into black magic. We're into Wicca, the white stuff . . . unless somebody gets us really, really pissed off!" He laughed, blowing gusts of beer breath into Nadelman's face. "Then boy oh boy, they better watch out!"

"And does it actually work?" said Rhoda.

"Fuckin' A!"

They waited for him to elaborate, but Lenny was gazing around the bar, as if looking for friends. Finally Nadelman said, "What's magic done for you two?"

Tina giggled and nudged Lenny with her hip. "Helped our sex life, hasn't it?"

He grinned. "Lemme tell you," he said, little eyes darting back and forth between his two listeners, "our sex life don't need no help. My old lady here's a fuckin' sex machine!"

Nadelman stole a glance at Tina, who was smiling as if she agreed. He found himself envisioning steamy occult-type sex with her; there was something arousing about the way the guy could brag about their sex life right in front of her like that. Tina had a solid little figure and looked up for anything, the kind who wouldn't say no to an orgy with a bunch of witches or bikers or whatever. Though the notion of all those hairy limbs, beer bellies, and tattoos was something of a turn-off.

"It's hard to put your finger on exactly," Lenny was saying, eyes still on Rhoda's pants. "Like, one guy in our coven went out and got himself a better job, just like that. And another couple was taking all over for an apartment, and like out of the blue they found one."

"With just an incredible rent, too," said Tina.

Nadelman nodded, disappointed. "That's something, all right."

"But it's more than that," said Lenny. "It's also a religion, you know?, like any other religion. We have our worship, our ceremonies, our beliefs . . ." He shrugged; he might just as easily have been talking about his bowling league. "Only we try to get back to the source, you dig? The life-force. Before the Church and all that other shit came along."

"I understand," said Nadelman. "A kind of pre-Christian religion, right? Like paganism?"

"Hey, you seem to know a bit," said Lenny, eyeing Nadelman guardedly. "You wouldn't happen to be an initiate yourself, by any chance?"

Nadelman was flattered. "Well, I've done a bit of reading in my time." He searched his memory for names. "Like Aleister Crowley, for instance."

"I know who you mean," said Tina. "The bald guy. They sell his

books upstairs in the shop."

"And that fellow Huysmans," said Nadelman, "the one who wrote *La-Bàs*." Two blank stares. "And Montague Summers . . ."

"Oh, yeah, I know him," said Lenny. "We got some books of his at home. Lots of pages in Latin and German."

"Right, with no translations. I also used to read a lot of supernatural fiction. Lovecraft, that sort of thing."

"Hey, that stuff's not fiction!" said the witch. "No way! That dude was into some heavy shit. Believe me, pal, I know. You better learn how to read between the lines. It's all there—those gods of his, and those demons; the whole Dagon myth . . ." He pronounced it *dog-gone*. "I'm telling you, that guy knew a lot more than he was letting on. You just gotta know what to look for—like I do."

Years later, when the letters began arriving from Huntoon, Nadelman would remember what had so frightened him about the witch: the man's boastfulness, his certainty that knowledge was concealed to all but him, and his earnest faith in the pleasures of revenge.

*Boy oh boy, they better watch out . . .*

There was a lesson to be drawn from those people in the bar, and Nadelman had not been slow to learn it. The world, he had discovered, was full of sad, lonely, pathetic people. They were basically good people, most of them, deserving of sympathy; worthy, even, of respect. But many of them—especially the sort who laid claim to celestial wisdom, preternatural power, magical loopholes in the laws of the universe—were not the sort of people he would care to have as friends. They were too disposed to fantasy, play-acting, and delusion: whatever would lend their dreary lives a bit of spurious drama. For too many of them, the occult was just a bridge between cosmology and kinky sex. They were, in a word, creeps.

In later days he'd met their counterparts in other walks of life. There were the military creeps—Nam-droppers, he called them—with their contempt for civilians and their penchant for macho-sounding jargon. There were the trivia creeps who read the *Times* from cover to cover and never forgot a fact; there were the movie creeps who saw three films a day and appeared to love them all indiscriminately; there were the religious creeps who'd found Jesus or Jehovah and wanted everybody to know. He'd met left-wing creeps with schemes to promote a workers' revolution, and right-wing creeps with stockpiles of weapons in their basements. He'd met technocreeps who prided themselves on their ability to read *Scientific American*, and wine creeps who made a show of knowing which brand to order in restaurants, and Mensa creeps who bragged of their IQs, and consumer creeps

who always found bargains that no one else knew about. Astrology nuts at the office had given him worthless tips on the market. Fruitarians in his apartment house had warned him that everything he ate was poison, even most vegetables. Cabdrivers had assured him that the national elections were fixed and that they alone knew who was behind it. Their one common denominator, the single sure mark of the creep, was that they were, every one of them, In The Know, privy to information denied to other mortals or that others were simply too stupid to see.

*Believe me, pal, I know . . .*

They had banished the questions from their lives, these people; they knew all the answers. But in fact, Nadelman had long ago concluded, they knew nothing, and less than nothing.

Over the years, the witch with the hairy chest had become, in Nadelman's mind, a composite of them all, their elected representative in Congress. Credit the creep with one thing, at least: if Nadelman had had any last flickering vestiges of an adolescent interest in the outré, the witch had effectively extinguished them, his grubby fingers snuffing out that final mystic candle. No longer would Nadelman waste time over cabalism, holistic healing, the Thirty-nine Steps to Power, and the Wisdom of the East; they were merely the banners to which losers flocked. Henceforth the daily battleground of the ad agency would be challenge enough for him, and its year-end raises and midyear bonuses enough of a reward. The woods were full of crackpots armed with mantras and mandalas, volumes of occult knowledge, pipelines to divinity, but he doubted that they dressed as well as he did, or smelled as good, or drove as big a car. Everybody died, after all, holy men as easily as ad men.

This robust philosophy had sustained him over the succeeding decade far more efficiently than art or religion ever had. Once he and Rhoda had lived in Cobble Hill, in a drafty fourth-floor walkup where their bookshelves were of bricks and planks, and roaches ruled the kitchen. Now they lived on the rich side of the river, in a two-bedroom co-op with a \$240-a-month parking space in the basement garage. He no longer jogged round the little park on Congress Street each morning, or scribbled strange, desperate poems at bedtime in an old spiral notebook; he belonged to a health club near his office now, where he sweated away the extra pounds on steel-and-leather Nautilus machines, and the last thing he'd written that rhymed had been a jingle for Jergen's Lotion. He had a wife who'd just gone back to work for a computer graphics firm, a son in third grade at a special school for dyslexics, a \$160,000 mortgage, and a dachshund. On Fridays after work he had guilty athletic sex in a Village apartment

with a Yugoslavian divorcée from the health club. He still had roaches, but then, everybody did.

Huntoon's letter, which arrived midway through the second week of October, came as a minor intrusion. When Nadelman got home from work that night, it was waiting for him, laid out alongside the *New Yorker* renewal notice, American Express bill, and annual Cancer Care appeal that had come in that day's mail. He frowned when he saw it, and as he read it through, he shook his head and muttered "God!" and "Such a creepy kid!"—though other men in his position might actually have been flattered.

The letter was, at least in part, a fan letter; and, as Nadelman immediately realized, it had come to him as the indirect result of a poem he had written twenty years ago in college, during his sophomore-year flirtation with the occult.

The poem, grandly titled "Advent of the Prometheans: A Cantata," was one of several that Nadelman had published in the Union College literary magazine, the *Unicorn*. He had written it as a protest against the compulsory Sunday chapel service that Union, as a Baptist institution, had in those days imposed upon all undergraduates, Christian, Jew, and atheist alike. The poem had been, as he saw it, a kind of metaphoric rock hurled at the ancient chapel's ugly stained-glass windows, with their pious flock of prophets, saints, and Savior.

A more compelling motive, though, had been one of simple imitation: having spent half the year reading books on black magic, followed by a dalliance with Swinburne, Huysmans, Villiers de L'Isle-Adam, and the rest of their decadent crew, from the exquisite, blood-drenched torments of Lautrémont to the batrachian-faced horrors of Lovecraft—in short, all the dark and sinister exotics to which adolescents are drawn—he had set out to write this kind of thing himself. The resulting work, a paean to some imaginary "leprous-featured rival of the Lord," had had ten distinct sections, each with its own peculiar meter, including a gaudily ornate "Invocation" near the end. It had been the longest poem, and by far the most ambitious, that Nadelman had ever attempted, or ever would again.

No one at Union had been as scandalized by the poem as Nadelman had hoped, since no one at Union actually read the *Unicorn*, save for those few souls whose names appeared regularly on its contents page. (It was popularly known around campus as "the *Eunuch*.") Nadelman's epic would have shared the same fate as the rest of that magazine's offerings—to molder away, forgotten, on some dusty library shelf, or, as with Nadelman's own copy, stuffed into an old suitcase in the hall closet, amid a jumble of papers, school reports, and tattered

notebooks from his youth—if it hadn't been for Nicky Sondheim.

Sondheim, two years Nadelman's senior, had been editor of the *Unicorn* in those days, an intense, fast-talking character with a subversive grin. He'd been the first person Nadelman knew who smoked marijuana; he'd lived off-campus, played folk guitar, and was known to have slept with a professor's wife. Nadelman had revered him as a great aesthete and, thinker, but had lost touch with him in the years following graduation. Sondheim, he'd heard, had gone on to become a not-too-successful songwriter and, later, a highly successful record producer. Today, in fact, Sondheim was an executive at Warner with several up-and-coming young rock groups in his stable, among them one from Astoria, Queens, that—after calling itself Rumpelstiltskin, the Fireflies, and a succession of similarly uninspired names—was now known to the world as Jizzmo.

Like AC/DC, Iron Maiden, Twisted Sister, and a host of lesser-known bands, Jizzmo specialized in purveying a kind of loud, satanic rock that appealed mainly to prepubescent boys. Nadelman's cantata, with its lines about "poison'd kisses," "the lord of dark corruption," and "the hunger of the worm that gnaws," would be just their meat. When, a year ago, it had come time for the group to cut its fourth album, *Walpurgis Night*, Sondheim had gone rummaging through his collection of old *Unicorns* and had seen to it that the group's lead singer, Ray Minor, who wrote most of their songs, got a look at Nadelman's poem. It lent itself perfectly to the type of florid, somewhat convoluted scoring for which Minor was famous. Nicky had also gotten Reinhold Schramm, the grave-looking lab-coated actor on the Phiso-Derm acne cream commercials, to narrate the Invocation; he'd described him to Nadelman, with a laugh, as "the poor man's Vincent Price." After a bit of prudent surgery here and there and the excision of some stanzas on divine retribution, Nadelman's poem had found its way onto the album's "B" side, where it appeared, retitled, as "New God on the Block," just between "Darn Tootin'" and "Devil of a Time."

Nadelman hadn't even heard of Jizzmo until last winter, when Sondheim had telephoned him, quite out of the blue, to tell him they were interested in his poem. Since, the way the group sang it, you could barely make out the words unless you strained to hear, and since the money he'd eventually received—twelve hundred and change, plus a point or two if the song ever went single and another if the album went gold—wasn't half as much as he'd initially expected, he had greeted the album's release last spring with little enthusiasm. Nicky had invited him to a party marking the event at Tavern on the Green, where Nadelman and his wife, nibbling on caviar-coated

squares of pastry, had been introduced to the various members of the band. Despite their shaggy appearance and the air of sneering menace that their public image demanded, they had struck Nadelman as an ordinary bunch of high school dropouts, good-natured, rather giggly, and no more satanic than the boys in the office mailroom. He had nothing in common with any of them; he could barely remember their names.

Besides, he had better things to do. He was now, at forty-two, one of the best-paid group heads at Sheridan-Sussman, creator, almost single-handed, of the highly successful Nobanana campaign that had taken a nine percent share of the fruit-flavored soft drink market away from Sprite and Seven-up. (The soda was said to contain the combined flavors of eight healthful fruits, bananas not among them—hence the product's name and also its popular jingle, "Yes, we have Nobanana.") Nadelman had no illusions about the actual social value of his work, but he took a certain pride in doing it cleverly.

It was hard to be proud, though, of being immortalized on a rock-and-roll album—especially in light of the other songs on it, most of them written by Minor, all of them juvenile and silly. Even his own words sounded silly, at least the ones he was able to make out.

*The patience of the glacier,  
The comfort of a shriek,  
The cruelty of the razor  
As it slices through your cheek—*

Whatever had he been thinking of?

He kept a dozen or so copies of the album in his record collection, intending to give them away as joke-gifts someday, or maybe sell if they ever became valuable. Nicky has assured him that they might; there was, he said, "an excellent market for out-of-print LPs."

"What an odd phrase for record albums," was all Nadelman had said. "Out-of-print!"

Two of the songs from *Walpurgis Night* had already gone single: "Darn Tootin'" and "Mercy Fuck" (under the abbreviated title "Mercy!"). Thanks to the notoreity of its lyrics, a cleaned-up version of the latter had even made the Top Forty—not that that particular honor was one to which Nadelman had ever aspired; the phrase itself merely reminded him of middle age.

Unlike the two hits, "New God on the Block" had never become particularly famous. As the longest song on the album, it had been considered too unwieldy for a single. Friends occasionally informed him that they'd heard it played in its entirety—or in a slightly cut



version with the instrumental section in the middle removed—on certain FM progressive-rock stations, the sort that didn't confine themselves to singles; but Nadelman seldom listened to the radio, except for a couple of all-news stations, and he'd never once heard it on the air.

The only mention he'd ever seen of his song had been in a West Coast magazine called *Hippodrome*, which was dedicated to hard rock and heavy-metal music and featured earnest articles with titles like "Freak League Hits the Comeback Trail" and "Motley Crue's Grossest Gig Ever." This year's June issue had had a think-piece by one Jordan Steinbaum entitled "Satan Calls the Tune?" (Nadelman suspected that the question mark had been an afterthought inserted by the magazine's lawyers.) It analyzed each of the songs on *Walpurgis Night* in reverent detail, and concluded that the album's central message was essentially one of "guarded nihilism."

Nadelman would not normally have come across it—he'd never even heard of the magazine—but Sondheim had mailed him a copy with a note paperclipped to it that read, "You're famous, kid! See page 31."

The article had devoted far more space to Minor's song "One Virgin Too Many" and to a ditty called "Blasted" by the group's notorious drummer, "Rocco" Roskone. Nadelman's contribution had been the subject of a single meaty paragraph:

*But for sheer metaphysicalchutzpah, Roskone's pagan battle cry is the merest whimper compared to the LP's longest cry, "New God on the Block," in which Minor's bravura tunesmithery and club-honed guitar pyrotechnics provide a solid heavy-metal underpinning to the arcane maledictions of a non-Jizzmo lyricist, the mysterious "I. Nadelman," described by Warner publicity only as "a decadent poet and surrealist currently residing in a bohemian section of Manhattan." The song's arrangement, complete with a spoken narration, is a bafflingly complex one, and so are the lyrics themselves, hinting at the emergence of some sinister "rival" deity responsible for all the world's ills—*

*The Idol of the abbatoir,  
The god of cancer, insanity, and pain—*

*and, unless these pointed ears deceive me, providing listeners with a list of ingredients, a kind of allegorical recipe, for the construction of a servant in this new god's image, presumably to do it some form of worship. Heady stuff for a sub-teen-oriented group like Jizzmo, and perhaps signaling the direction the band will be taking*

*in the years ahead.*

Nadelman had been amused to learn that his East Seventy-sixth Street neighborhood was a stronghold of bohemianism. Presumably Sondheim had had a hand in that. He didn't know Nicky well enough anymore to guess whether the line had been an ironic joke, or merely nostalgia.

Apparently it was the article that had led Nadelman's correspondent to him. A little white gummed label, pasted slightly askew on the corner of the envelope, bore the return address—Mrs. Lonee Huntoon, 1152 Locust Court, Long Beach, Long Island, NY—and the silhouette of a tiny red lobster. The *s* in *Mrs.* and the first name had been crossed out by the same heavy, childish hand that had written the letter, in a thick black ballpoint pen on pages torn from a spiral notebook, leaving ragged perforations at the edge like a line of broken battlements.

*Dear Sir,*

*Your the only I. Nadelman in Manhattan so I sure hope this letter gets to you. If it falls into the wrong hands I bet we would really be In For It—right? I figured you were one of those West Coast writers & never thought you could actually be living so close by to me!!! Well sir enough of that. Your probably a busy man & I dont want to waste your time. I really have got to take my hat off to you though. You do know what your talking about thats for sure. Ive tried the charts in the Crowley books but they don't work worth shit & I used to practice the Bledsoe Color Method & belong to the Astar Society & the E.O.D. but frankly the States Ive gotten into are not all that powerful. And I tried playing that new Judas Priest album backward (you know that cut I mean) on a device I personally invented but though I heard some hints at Who was up there calling the shots (I dont have to tell YOU—right?) & the last cut on the album has a line I distinctly heard about "He waits" & "watch us over" or "watch us suffer" or some such—the rest was not too clear.*

*Got sick of following Priest after there Jersey City gig. Well sir you cant blame me—right? But Ive been a Jizzmo fan since that dynamite Out/Rage/Jizz album. (By the way are you friends with Rocco Roskone? Whats he like?) The main reason Im writing is I was really excited by your song. The way you come right out & give those Instructions & all for making that Creature to serve the God. Thats just got to get the others scared dont you think!!*

*I think your really brave for letting out the Process like that - I have been building one of these Creatures on my roof in the Gods image just like you say. It will sure as Hell scare the Bejeesus out of those little pests that keep leaving there shit up there & disturbing Mama - so she is all for it!*

*I have all the necessary Ingredients right here on the beach & will follow all your Instructions. Well sir I know you are a very busy man but theres just one thing I want to ask you-How do I give it the face thats in the song? ("Licorice" is it? Its hard to make it out with all those damn guttar riffs.) I cant carve a rock like the song says-there arent even any around here big enough anyway & the melons I try keep coming out a mess.*

*Please write back real fast!!!*

Faithful  
Your/Follower,  
Arlen Huntoon

No doubt the boy had meant this as a fan letter, but Nadelman found it disturbing. It reminded him of the strangers' letters that occasionally found their way into the agency, full of rambling complaints about a faulty product, sometimes in tones of deference bordering on obsequiousness, sometimes making veiled threats or hinting at a payoff, often veering from sentence to sentence between these two postures. He usually read them over with a mixture of pity and revulsion, mentally adding *sic* every few lines. Huntoon's letter aroused the same reaction; he was sorry that the young creep had found out his address. At least, though, he didn't live nearby; Long Beach was nearly an hour away on the Long Island Railroad. Nadelman himself had spent most of his childhood in Woodland Park, only two stops earlier on the same line.

The average Jizzmo fan was all of twelve, but this one sounded older. At any rate, he still lived with his mother, and apparently he cared enough about her to erect some kind of scarecrow on the roof, a scarecrow built to Nadelman's design. "*It will sure as Hell scare the Bejeesus out of those little pests . . .*" Nadelman remembered how, back in Brooklyn, he'd had to keep scaring away the pigeons that would try to roost on the ledge of the window by the baby's bed, lest his son get one of those pigeon-shit diseases Rhoda was always reading about in the *Times*. Out in Long Beach it was probably seagulls.

"Daddy?" Michael trotted into the kitchen, where Nadelman had been reading the mail. He was now a few months short of eight and seldom content just to walk anymore. "See? Look what I did."

Nadelman put down the letter and looked at what his son was holding out. It was an ordinary wooden pencil with a thin wire staple protruding from the middle, like a tiny croquet wicket.

"And what might that be?"

"It's a pencil with a handle, so you can carry it with you. I invented it."

"Ah-hah. And very useful, too!" He gave the boy a kiss on his curly hair, remembering how Huntoon had alluded to "*a device I personally invented*." Perhaps all men were inventors; hadn't he himself invented a god? Nadelman had no clear mental image of Huntoon, but for a moment he pictured him as a shabbier, more distant version of his son, wonder-struck with the awesome possibilities of bending things, fastening things, wiring together the myriad things of this world.

"I certainly hope you're going to write the child back," said Rhoda at dinner that night.

"Well, I'm not sure that's such a good idea," Nadelman said carefully. "Better not to start with him. Let him think I'm not the Nadelman he wants."

"Aww . . ." Rhoda made a concerned face, the kind that, when she'd made it years ago, at bag ladies and bums, had forced him to realize that she was more than just a sexpot. In some ways he still preferred the sexpot. "Honey, that isn't very nice," she said. "I'll bet it's the first fan letter you've ever gotten."

"And probably the last," said Nadelman, "unless I decide to turn rock star."

"Well, I just think you owe him a reply."

"Yes, yes, I guess so," he said, to avert the chance of any more concerned faces, but swayed as well by the image of a forlorn teenaged version of his son waiting somewhere out in Long Beach for a friendly word.

He carried the boy's letter with him to the office the next day and showed it, chuckling but secretly proud, to two of his colleagues. Then he typed a short reply—one that, by raising no questions, would discourage further communication.

*Dear Mr. Huntoon:*

*Many thanks for your kind letter. It's good to know there's someone out there who enjoys my work. No, I'm sorry to say I don't know Mr. Roskone or any other members of the band. I don't as a rule follow rock music. As for the question of what sort of face to give your creation, I'm afraid I may have been a bit impractical in having my hero carve "a leprous\*-featured visage, hewn*

*from solid rock."* Probably the easiest way to make an effective face for the figure would be to buy a rubber Halloween mask and simply put it over one of those melons of yours. Good luck, and hope it accomplishes its purpose!

\*not "licorice"

He dropped it in the OUT bin on his desk and turned, pleased with his efficiency, to other work—a sheaf of glossy product specs for a new frozen dessert with which he had to familiarize himself for tomorrow's meeting, some copy to approve ("I cannot tell a lie. The flavor of Holiday Farm Cherry Treets comes right off the Cherry Tree!"), a phone call to his broker. Midway through the call, while the broker, never more than a voice on the phone, left to verify the day's prices, a nagging thought assailed Nadelman—*Don't start with these people!*—but he was soon distracted by the man's return and a litany of figures that could spell the difference between a vacation in Dubrovnik or one in Vermont. When he thought of the letter again, his OUT bin had already been emptied.

There was no one else at the office he could think of to show Huntoon's letter, no one else who'd be anything but contemptuous. Fan letters from semiliterates were, at best, a dubious honor, and though most of his associates were aware that an old college poem of Nadelman's had lately been turned into a rock song, he wasn't sure it was politically wise to remind them of it. They were all failed writers here, after all, and not inclined to look kindly on a fellow employee who dabbled, however humbly, in the arts.

He slipped Huntoon's letter into his shirt pocket, and that night, after dinner, while his wife and son were in the living room silently absorbed in *All Creatures Great and Small*, he swung open the hall closet and from its depths, smelling of galoshes and ice skates, dragged the battered suitcase that contained all that was left of his college work. There seemed no more appropriate place to file Huntoon's letter. It would never have occurred to him to throw it away; someday it might provide solace, like an old love letter.

The suitcase, inherited from Rhoda's father, had been elegant once and probably expensive, but now the leather bore a zigzag of scratches, as from a mad scribbler, and the pair of brass clamps that held the two sides closed were stiff with age. As he pried them loose, the suitcase fell open like a book, and a cascade of papers spilled out onto the rug. At his feet he recognized the faded pastel covers of the college literary magazine, several legal pads containing early attempts at composition, and a stack of ancient notebooks filled with lecture notes and doodles. Here, in fact, lying amid the pile, was the very

issue of the *Unicorn* in which his poem had first appeared.

Seating himself cross-legged on the rug, he flipped through the magazine's yellowed pages, shaking his head at the thick institutional-looking type (how the crew in the Sheridan-Sussman art department would wince at stuff like that), the uneven leading and margins, the self-important revolutionary rhetoric, and the pretentious "Aesthetick Manifesto" (God, had they really spelled it with a "k"?), with which his friend Nicky had prefaced the issue ("We seek no wide audience for the expressions herein contained, but rather the informed understanding of a small band of like-minded amateurs of the written word . . ."). Christ, could he ever blackmail Sondheim with this stuff now!). The issue's lead story was a thinly fictionalized sketch by some coed from Connecticut about losing her virginity. Nadelman recalled that both he and Nicky had had the hots for her; that intense, fragile quality of hers had had him drooling in those days, but today he'd probably find it exasperating. Strange, to think that she'd be forty now.

Ah, here was his opus—"Advent of the Prometheans: A Cantata." How in the world had he ever arrived at so pompous a title? He didn't even know what the hell it meant anymore, though he recalled laboring over the phrase for hours one night in his dorm room. The "Cantata" part, at least, he dimly remembered; it was taken from some poem he'd had to read for one of his courses—"The Beggars' Cantata," something like that. He suspected that his use of the term was technically, at least, incorrect, but no doubt in those days it had struck him as *le mot juste*.

The poem itself was not entirely pleasant to come back to after all these years; it hardly seemed his own work at all, but rather that of a naive, headstrong young son, tied to him by blood but something of an embarrassment to his old man. He knew that Jizzmo had deleted several portions of the poem from their musical version, but he'd never been interested enough to compare the two.

He scanned it now with some trepidation, wincing as his first glance discovered a typo in the opening section's title: "The Divine Impresonation." Jesus, no wonder he'd gone into advertising! There were ten such sections in all, each with its own lofty title preceded by a Roman numeral. How ambitious he'd been then. To think that he'd set out to bring down God!

Indeed, Part I read like a prosecutor's brief against the Lord:

*A god who stinks  
of carrion because  
Our blood He drinks  
and on our flesh He gnaws.*

He'd had it both ways in those days: capitalizing the pronouns for mystical effect, yet—just for the *frisson*—lower-casing “god” throughout, like one who deliberately mispronounces an enemy’s name.

God hadn’t really been an enemy, of course; it had mainly been those damned chapel windows every Sunday, with their saccharine visions of heaven. (He had long ago decided that anyone who could believe in such an afterlife deserved to be sent there forthwith.) His main interest in writing the poem, in fact, had been a simple and earnest desire to blaspheme. In his own adolescent way, Nadelman had been trying to live up to his name: he’d set out to needle God. There didn’t have to be a reason; young men liked to blaspheme, just as young boys liked to play at being good.

Ironically, for all the passion of his jeremiads, he’d been something of a skeptic even then. Far from actually believing in the cruel new “rival god” described later in the poem, he’d even had his doubts about the old one.

The Lord, in fact, had long since vanished from his life in the same manner as the three gods of his childhood—Santa, the Tooth Fairy, and the Easter Bunny. Even as a schoolboy, despite the rabbi’s tedious sermons and the wonders described in his Hebrew texts, there’d seemed no reason to believe in this one god any more than in the others; all were merely amiable supernatural fictions designed to comfort childish minds. Later, in high school, when he’d read Freud’s “The Future of an Illusion,” he had found it old hat.

He had moral doubts about the Lord, as well. He’d been raised not only on Santa Claus, but also on fairy tales, fables, and nursery stories; colorful fantasies in which goodness was invariably rewarded in the end, and evil punished. As a child, he’d believed such things were true. He had also believed—thanks to his childhood picture books, the ones filled with fuzzy felt animals—that the only proper response to something furry was to reach out and pet it.

The world, as a result, had proved a bitter disappointment, punctuated here and there by nasty surprises. At age three he had reached out in the garden to pet the enticing yellow fur of a passing bumblebee, and had been rewarded with a wicked sting on the palm of his hand that left it swollen twice its size. At school he’d discovered that there were no heroes: that the weakest lived in terror of the strong, and that God seemed to favor the bullies.

Not that he himself had much to complain of; save for the inevitable pains of growing up in this world, his own life had always been comfortable enough. But the lives of others, the ones he saw depicted on the TV news and in the magazines, seemed overwhelmingly tragic.

It was hard to have faith in the justice of things when all around him people were dying in curious and terrible ways.

Sometimes, admittedly, the deaths of his fellow men had been easy to accept, merely demonstrating the good sense of the universe. As a boy, he'd heard about an overeager deer hunter who had stumbled over a root and had blown the top of his head off; the tale had merely confirmed the rightness of things. Years later he would hear reports about revolutionaries of one stripe or another who blew themselves to bits while building homemade bombs; he found such stories quite cheering. The cosmos was just, after all.

By the time he'd reached high school, he'd discovered that, with a little intellectual effort, he could justify damned near anything—and it certainly helped stave off despair. Innocent people, it turned out, were in no real danger; it was only the guilty who died. Did cigarette smokers cough their lives away? They'd clearly brought it on themselves. Did some alcoholic poet drink himself to death? It served him right. When a planeload of nuns went down over the Andes, he told himself that this was what happened to people who tried to jam their religion down other people's throats. Pious do-gooders!

With a few small logical contortions, you could take the game still further. Was a socialite found stabbed to death in her apartment? The empty-headed parasite, she deserved it. Was a lawyer mugged? We've got more than enough lawyers, thank you. Selfish bastards! Did a doctor wreck his private plane? Think of all the money that jerk was making! Another OD'ed rock star? How trite! A father of twelve killed by a hit-and-run driver? The thoughtless asshole, who told him to produce all those children? A family in Utah slain by a tornado? Only schmucks lived out there anyhow.

Sometimes the game became difficult—but doggedly he kept right on playing, if only to preserve his peace of mind. Did old men and women suffer strokes? Maybe they should have exercised more. Were people dying right and left of heart attacks and cancer? Well, he'd make damned sure to watch what he ate.

Then one day, disconcertingly, he'd read about a young Columbia student killed by youths in the subway while going to the aid of a stranger. The guy had been the same age as Nadelman, from almost the same background, at the top of his class. They'd even had the same major.

Nadelman, at that point, gave up the game.

Not everyone would have, even then. A Job might have convinced himself that all human beings were guilty, he as well as the rest; that all were living here on borrowed time; and that the Lord was therefore



perfectly justified in killing anyone He damned well chose. But then, Nadelman had always regarded Job as a bit of a lunatic.

He himself had reached a somewhat more reasonable conclusion: rather than worshiping God as a divine and highly arbitrary executioner, it made more sense to see the position as vacant. There was no one in control up there. The office was empty. Nobody home.

Or maybe (and here was the germ of his poem) there was simply another god in charge, deranged and malign, delighting in cruelty and mischief. How else to explain the things he read each day in the headlines in the *Post*?

Nadelman didn't read the paper itself, having learned how unreliable it was, but the headlines continued to entrance him: the couple in their nineties who had taken their own lives when a new landlord evicted them from their apartment, claiming he needed it for relatives (the law, and God, had done nothing); the high school honor student, returning from her after-school job, who'd been accidentally killed by a stray police bullet (the cop had been firing at a mugger, whom the Lord had helped to escape); the social worker who, on her way home from tutoring a blind man, had been murdered by a psycho with a meat cleaver (he was still at large); the little girl who'd died because her fundamentalist parents refused her the medicine that might have saved her life. (The parents had claimed religious freedom, and saw evidence of "divine justice" at work.)

Today, Nadelman knew, the morons who'd shelled out five hundred bucks for a couple of weekends at *est*—there were several of them at the office, each creepier than the last—would probably assure him that we are all responsible for everything that happens to us, even tumors or cellulite deposits, even a loose brick tumbling onto our heads as we stroll down the sidewalk. But it had seemed much more satisfying to Nadelman, at that time, to blame it all on God—even one he didn't believe in.

The one low-level religious studies course he'd been pressured into taking at Union had failed to change his mind. (It had also given him his only D.) The God whose praises were sung in the Bible simply didn't seem to square with the reality Nadelman saw all around him. The fellow in the Bible could be cruel, vindictive, and jealous—a mean SOB, in fact, especially in the Old Testament—but at least He was, in some harsh, authoritarian way, a just God. Yet despite the propaganda dished out to the students each Sunday, Nadelman had seen evidence that another god was at the wheel—"a furtive god," the poem had said, "a greedy god":

*We struggle for an answer, but no god is there –  
Just the deity of cancer, of anguish and despair.*

He frowned now as he read over the verses. They seemed the merest doggerel, like lines from a bad translation. Back in those days he'd apparently thought it cool to stick "ravaged" on the same line as "ravished," and to put accents—grave over the last syllable of words like "punished," so they'd sound more poetic. And to use, heaven help him, words like "foam-fleck'd" and "slime-drench'd." (Had he really gone in for the apostrophes? He checked the magazine and winced. He had.) A lot of the poem, he knew, recorded nothing more meaningful than some youthful experiments with a rhyming dictionary. He remembered the dictionary itself, a bar mitzvah present from Aunt Lotte, along with an expensive leather notebook whose corner he saw now, peeking from the bottom of the pile of old paper.

Nadelman had had enough theology for one night. Getting to his feet, he stuffed the papers back into the suitcase, slipped Huntoon's letter inside, and snapped the bag closed. Shoving it to the back of the closet, he went into the living room to catch the end of *Creatures*. By bedtime the letter was forgotten.

On Thursday of the following week, however, the mail, like a sea forever demanding offerings, casting up new, unexpected objects in return, brought a second letter from Huntoon. It was shorter than the first, but considerably more unnerving—in part, no doubt, because of the photograph.

*Dear Mr. Nadelman,*

*Thank you for writing back to me so fast. Mama says shes going to frame your letter. Weve never had the autograph of an actual author before though I have shaken hands with Joe Elliott of Def Leppard on several occasions & have a signed photo in the dinette of Eddie Van Halen. The mask is a great idea & looks just fine. Itll scare the living shit out of those Bravermans!!! (They wont be so "Braverman" then—right?) I couldn't find anything that looked right at the 5 & dime, its all Star Wars stuff & Gremlins these days, but I bought a big birds head sort of like a rooster head because of that line in the song about how the Creature "comes before cock crow" & I turned it inside out. It looks damn good that way. You can see it in the picture Mama took. I keep the thing on my roof where the sun can get at it & maybe the god will consent to give it life.*

The photograph showed what appeared to be a mass of rotting garbage, the sort that Nadelman had seen washed up by the tide,

glistening with grease and reeking of dead fish, when, as a boy, he'd walked the Long Beach shoreline in winter. It lay piled in a roughly manlike shape, arms outspread, like those false aircraft images that New Guineans built out of underbrush to attract passing planes. The figure was lying on the tarry black surface of an apartment rooftop; in the distance Nadelman could see the flat top of a similar building and the peaked roofs of neighboring houses. Jagged things that looked like shards of glass, perhaps from broken windows, gleamed amid its body, especially at the hands. A used toilet-paper roll and gobs of crumpled Kleenex, he former sticking upright like a phallus, showed where Huntoon had dumped the contents of a bathroom wastebasket onto the roof.

It was strange to see a creature from the back room of his imagination—something he'd conjured up in a few scribbled lines conceived in the loneliness of his dorm—take hideous concrete form in the photograph. Seeing it embodied there on the roof made him feel vaguely godlike—but an imperfect, irresponsible god who let others do his dirty work, and who had no real hint of what he had created until he saw it face to face. It was a little like the shock he'd felt the previous year, working on the campaign for a new vitamin-enriched peanut-butterlike spread called Qiffle, when one of his illustrators had first unveiled the strange peanut-shaped creature he'd drawn to go with Nadelman's tag line ("What in the world is a Qiffle!"); or like the feeling he'd had, the uncertain pride and disbelief, when a beaming nurse had first shown him his son. Only this thing was something he'd prefer to disown.

He wondered, briefly, who the Bravermans were, and why it was important they be scared.

At the top of the photo was the thing's head, presumably a melon, though the fruit was concealed beneath a grotesque-looking full-face rubber mask turned inside out. Instead of a bird, it looked like some travesty of a sea creature, an immense, smooth, pink-skinned shrimp, dragged from the depths with mouth sealed over and eye sockets vacant.

Crouched at the head, cradling it like a trophy, was a grinning hatchet-faced man with a black moustache, sideburns, and a long, wolfish-looking jaw. He was dressed as if for winter—it was cold near the water, Nadelman knew—in heavy gloves and a shapeless green overcoat with a pair of brownish stains down the front. He was holding the thing's head up to the camera like some exultant lawman posed beside the corpse of John Dillinger, or like the soldiers propping up the head of Che Guevera. The man was easily in his thirties and looked rough, broad-shouldered, and beefy, the sort who wouldn't

go out of his way to avoid a brawl. And something malicious in his smile reminded Nadelman of the witch he'd met that night in the bar down in Chelsea.

The letter continued:

*Thats me there on the roof with it. No cracks please about my ugly mug! Im raring to go & there are certain people wholl be sorry they ever chose to cross me. Now all I have to do is invoke the god & get it moving.*

*A.F.A. (A Friend Always)  
Arlen*

*P.S. Would you mind if I called you up some time? Theres a lot you & me should discuss. I know your a busy man & promise I will not abuse the privilege.*

Nadelman's heart beat faster. So this was his supposed teenaged fan, the one he'd felt so sorry for. (Or rather, the one Rhoda had felt so sorry for; another mark against her.) His instincts had been right: he should never have written back to the fellow. He should have sensed that wolfish face even in Huntoon's first letter, peering at him just behind the paper's ragged edges, whispering to him from the smeared black ink.

And to think that the dumb bastard took Jizzmo's song seriously; he actually believed that the words Nadelman had cribbed from a rhyming dictionary and a bunch of college library books were a magical spell, and was now waiting patiently for the Holy Ghost to come and animate his garbage pile. Nadelman remembered something Rhoda's analyst had told her: "Reality is never enough for some people."

He resolved that tomorrow, immediately upon getting up, he would attend to something he'd been meaning to do for years, what with clients who felt free to bother him at any hour here at home. He would get himself an unlisted phone number, and keep the creeps at bay.

The night was chillier than any so far that fall, a preview of November just ten days away, while December, the real thing, lurked just beyond the horizon. Three floors down, among the dim shapes of cars parked on Seventy-sixth Street, an automobile alarm went off with an insistent animal yowl, no doubt from the mere touch of another car's bumper. Nadelman lay unmoving with his head on the pillow, sensing the other hundreds of people in the neighborhood waiting, as he was, for the siren to stop. An hour after midnight he heard distant thunder, strange on so cold a night, and probably the last he'd

hear till spring. Whipped by the wind, rain slapped against the windows like something solid and alive. He thought of the same rain soaking the thing that lay out there on the roof in Long Beach. Was it no more now than a sodden mass of garbage? Or did it lie there like a corpse?

Rolling out of bed so as not to waken Rhoda, who, over years of their marriage, had become more and more unmovable in sleep, even as his own became increasingly uncertain, he tiptoed out to the hall in his underwear, closing the bedroom door behind him. In the kitchen he poured a finger of cognac into the "World's Greatest Dad" mug Michael had given him last Father's Day, but after taking a sip he decided it would give him heartburn. Anyway, this stuff didn't do his body any good; he had to stay in shape for his weekly session downtown tomorrow with Cele. Carefully he poured the dark liquid back into the bottle. From the living room came the sound of rain beating urgently against the windows. He rose and went toward them. From the end-table beside the couch, where remnants of the day's mail were still gathered, he withdrew the snapshot from Huntoon's most recent letter. Studying the blind, smooth-faced thing that lay on the roof, he smiled, remembering a comic-book character from his childhood: "Heap," it had been called, a slithering mass of living garbage, complete with flies and wavy odor-lines. And suddenly he remembered how he'd arrived at the name of his poem. The creature mentioned in its closing stanzas, the servant of the nameless god, had been a monster he'd made up of equal parts Heap; the Golem, and a third figure, one that had given him his unlikely title, "Advent of the Prometheans." He had taken it from "The Modern Prometheus," the subtitle of Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*.

Like a child frightened of a face staring from the cover of a comic book, and who, even in a darkened room, must turn the picture over before he dares give himself to sleep, Nadelman felt an urge to hide the letter and photo in the same place he'd filed the previous one. Opening the closet in the hall, he dragged out the old suitcase again. But once he'd gotten the catch unfastened, instead of slipping the envelope inside, he reached in and drew forth the *Unicorn*, which he opened back to his poem.

Maybe it wasn't quite so bad after all. Maybe he'd had some talent then. The second section, severely truncated in Jizzmo's version, was entitled "A Vision of Decay." It advanced an explanation of the Lord's apparent callousness and neglect. Perhaps, it said, He had simply grown old, senile, weak:

*A dull grey god of fizzle, fail, and blunder,  
Who speaks to us in drizzle, not in thunder.*

In the third section, "Recognition," the poem's narrator decided that the sheer sadism of the god he'd been observing was far too energetic, and too fiendishly ingenious, to be the work of an old, sick, burnt-out god. All the evidence bespoke a new god, a bloodthirsty young upstart, "not mild,/but savage, wild"—"A hyperactive god, too viciously inventive to be sane." Nadelman's intention, at the time, had been to compare the position of the human race to that of beleaguered medieval peasants, hapless pawns in an incomprehensible war between two uncaring lords. As the battle raged this way and that, they suffered the agonies of both sides.

Part IV, "Retribution," had been cut altogether by the band—perhaps properly so, since it amounted to something of a false lead. In it the narrator tried to imagine where this upstart god had come from. Perhaps the old God had created him ("‘I’ll create Me a Creator,’ He would say") in order to punish mankind for its polluted civilization and warlike ways, which spelled ruin for all life on earth. (Nadelman shook his head as he scanned the ringing phrases, remembering the certainties of the early sixties.)

The next section, "Hymn to Corruption," half Swinburne, half Pete Seeger, had been left intact. It wondered if there might be "pollution in heaven, just as here on earth," and if this new god might be some sort of mutation—in short, a true adversary. Such a hypothesis struck the narrator as correct, for the new god appeared to be, in terms of pure hellishness, as powerful as the old: "A rival god who sides with the bullies, the landlords and the bees."

"Honey, come to bed." It was Rhoda, passing through the hall on her way to the bathroom. He rubbed his eyes and stood, just as glad to put away the poem; but before he closed the suitcase, he took the magazine out and hid it in the end-table drawer.

As he lay in bed, waiting for sleep more resignedly now, he wondered whether he should answer Huntoon's new letter; perhaps it would be wiser to ignore it. He forced the thought away, listening instead to the more soothing voice of the rain. At last, as the rain stopped, he slept, but dreamed that something hovered at his window, a great angelic thing with the face of a bumble-bee.

His concern over what to do about Huntoon's letter proved academic, because Friday of the following week brought a postcard from him. The picture on the front showed the deserted dining room of the Sea Glades Manor. "On the Boardwalk at Long Beach, Long Island. Providing world-famous cuisine and unparalleled service for over forty years."

*I tried calling you but they said its not a working number. You never wrote back how I could reach you or maybe your letter was lost in the mail but thats OK because by following your Instructions I am now in communication with your god & Hes everything you said. Thanks again for your courage & guidance. Dont worry no ones going to get punished except the ones who deserve it.*

Nadelman felt himself sliding further down the feathery slope to the land of unreason. First the creep believed the Rival God was actually real; now he claimed he'd talked to him. Earlier that week one of the ad industry trade magazines had recounted the story—with unalloyed approval—of an Englishman who, writing a history of UFOs, had playfully invented a supposed sighting over Oxford, and of how annoyed he'd been when, for years afterward, the incident was cited as authenticated fact by dozens of other saucer books. The lie had become real. And a certain Welsh writer named Machen, the article went on to say, had written a story during World War I about the so-called "Angels of Mons," ghostly Saxon bowmen who'd come to the aid of embattled British troops. The story had become a full-fledged legend, with war veterans claiming in later years that they'd actually seen these spirits. "All of us in the communications industry can learn something useful from this," the article had concluded.

Nadelman spent that weekend preparing for a presentation on the Holiday Farm account, and on Sunday he took Rhoda and Michael for a drive to a clamhouse on the Jersey shore. The next day at the agency, while in the middle of a meeting with one of the creative directors, he was buzzed by the secretary who worked in the corridor outside his office and whose services he shared with his neighbor.

"Mr. Huntoon for you," she said.

Nadelman, his hands full of sketches from the art department, froze.

"He's here?"

"Uh-uh," she said, "call for you. Shall I put him through?"

"No!" His voice was loud enough to bring conversation in his office to a temporary halt. Dropping a sheaf of cartoons of the boy George Washington wolfing down frozen desserts, he hurried out to the secretary's desk. "Listen," he whispered, "just take a message. I'm not in and you don't know when I'm coming in. I'm *never* in for that guy, understand?"

The girl nodded as if chastened. Nadelman waited by her desk as she told Huntoon he was out, cursing himself for having blown his cover by writing to the guy on company stationery. He watched her begin to jot down the message on a pink slip, then stop when it became

clear she'd be able to remember it all.

"Uh-huh, okay, I'll tell him," she said. "Yes, I will. Yes, yes, I promise." She hung up and looked at Nadelman. "What a weird guy," she said. "It was hard to hear him. He sounded like he was calling from a bar."

"What was the message?"

She gave a half shrug. "He says to tell you, 'I've got it up and dancing'."

The meeting did not end until long after five, when the city outside his window had already begun to grow dark. Emboldened by the trappings of his office—the bright fluorescent lights, the serene curve of his steel IBM, the plush burgundy carpet, and the view of the East Side of Manhattan, a world so much higher, and consequently safer, than that of his apartment—with the spires of Pan Am and Chrysler looming beside him like guardians, Nadelman wrote back:

*Dear Mr. Huntoon:*

*You may indeed, as you say, be "in communication" with a god, but I have to inform you that it's not my god. Mine does not exist! It was merely something I made up years ago for a college poem, long before the members of Jizzmo and the rest of those groups were even out of kindergarten. Please understand that I don't mean to disparage your religious beliefs; I'm a great respecter, in fact, of all people's rights to worship whatever gods they choose in whatever manner they choose. That's one of the things that makes this country great. But the particular god you claim you've contacted is just a work of fiction, and it disturbs me to see you taking it so literally.*

*Also, I must ask you to please refrain from trying to call me here in the office. As you noted, I'm terribly busy and cannot allow myself the luxury of personal conversations. My home phone number is unlisted because of the medical problems of someone in my family, and, as I'm sure you understand, I cannot give it out. Whatever you want to do with the scarecrow or whatever it is you've constructed is fine with me, but I have no interest in the matter and really don't care to be involved. I wish you the very best of luck and suggest that you do not try to contact me again.*

He prayed that this would do the trick. Later that evening, as he walked home from the office, he felt dimly oppressed by some menace the streets held tonight, and was sure he'd glimpsed a cloaked, dwarfish creature scurry into a building half a block ahead. He attributed



it to his state of mind, until, entering his apartment, he was greeted by the tiny shrieking figure of his son, pirouetting before him in one of Rhoda's old black raincoats, with blood-red makeup on his face and deep black rings beneath his eyes. Behind the boy, smiling, stood his wife, a damp washcloth in her hand. Nadelman realized with relief, that he had missed another Halloween.

His letter must have crossed Huntoon's in the mail, because on Wednesday of the same week—another stormy evening with echoes of unseasonable thunder, just as if they'd never passed through summer—there was a third envelope waiting for him, weighing slightly more than the earlier ones. It contained a packet of snapshots.

*Dear Mr. Nadelman,*

*Tried you yesterday at work but they said you were out. That's like the dispatcher at Val-R-Rite who has no time for me now that I'm laid off but I'm not saying your in the same boat he is. Did they give you my message?*

*These are for you, I think you the one who really deserves them. I'm sure you'll recognize Whos in these pictures. I took them on the roof last night but I wasn't sure how to use the flash attachment & it didn't work on all of them. It should be better when the moonlight gets stronger.*

There were six photos in all, and they were ludicrous. They looked like the sort of crazy unframed shots people brought back from fraternity initiations, hunting trips, or Halloween parties, despite the fact that they showed only a single figure—clearly that of Huntoon himself, the over-the-head pink mask concealing his face, dancing on the rooftop in the darkness. His arms were thrust grotesquely in the air, like a broken doll's, and in one shot his right arm was bent behind him in an angle that looked almost painful. In several of the pictures one of his legs was raised like that of a dog about to urinate, revealing a dull brown military boot, the laces loose. He was wearing thick grey gloves that made his hands look comically oversized, except in one shot where they were raised to the sky as if in supplication. Nadelman recognized Huntoon's baggy pants and stained green overcoat from the earlier photo. Despite the man's assertion in the letter, the photos had presumably been taken by his mother—though an old lady (perhaps the mother's friend?) appeared in the background of one of them, solid and kerchiefed like an East European peasant, the flashbulb's glare making her stand out against the blackness behind her as she gazed solemnly at the proceedings. Her face was lined and

glowing, her eyes and the eyes of the masked dancing thing flashing weirdly in the light.

Nadelman was momentarily unnerved to discover that across the back of the last photo, Huntoon had written: *Mama*.

Well then, some friend had taken the photos. Even people like Huntoon had friends. Didn't they?

Nadelman kept returning surreptitiously to the pictures all evening—after dinner, between *Taxi* and the news, just before bedtime—as if to a cache of pornographic photos. And his thoughts kept returning to the letter he had sent Huntoon earlier that week. He wondered if the man had received it yet, and if so, whether he'd been hurt by it; and, if he were, what that hurt might mean for himself.

Meanwhile, Nadelman peered out the window of his bedroom, as the rain pelted the few remaining pedestrians making their way down Seventy-sixth Street and the crash of far-off thunder echoed up and down the block. Somewhere great wheels were rolling through the ocean, plunging down some secret track, making their way ever closer to the mainland; he could almost hear them. He got up, stared once more at the face of the thing in the photos on the living room table, and slid the poem from the drawer.

"With lidless eyes and lipless mouth"—that phrase, so annoyingly apt, came from "The Lineaments of Despair," the sixth section of the poem, in which the narrator attempted to imagine what the savage new god must look like. This part Nadelman remembered well. Judging by its handiwork, the god was not a thing of beauty, but must indeed be "a leprous thing." The narrator described it as monstrous, a travesty of other deities, and referred to it throughout the section as "Spider Eyes," "the Mosquito God," and "the Bee." In further defiance of logic, but perhaps in misplaced homage to William Golding, the god was also referred to as "Lord of the Roaches."

The poem's seventh section, "A Celebration," threw in the towel, philosophically speaking, declaring, in effect, You can't fight this new god, or at least you can't defeat him. The narrator instead preferred to celebrate him by building a creature in his image—"A thing to walk among us, and carry on His work":

*I'll set it free to murder and maraud,  
To serve the dictates of this nameless god.*

The eighth section was the so-called "Chant of the Fabricant," the part the rock critic had likened to "a recipe," in which the narrator, in the tones of an occult Julia Child, exhorted the reader to "Gather garbage, offal, and pollution/From the waste places of the world . . . /From the dumps, the cities' sewers, and dry deserts,/From the

refuse of the shore." (Perhaps, mused Nadelman, this was why the song had so excited Huntoon out in Long Beach.) The result was to be mixed together, with a boulder for the head, and shaped into "a semblance of the monster in ourselves."

At last it was time to give the creature life, to release the thing to wander the world and teach humanity the truth. The ninth section had therefore been titled "Prolegomenon to the Creature." Seated in his living room, Nadelman scowled as he must have scowled twenty years before to notice that the section contained another unfortunate typo, perhaps even a malicious one: "a message from beyond the veil of night" had become "a massage." He wondered if anyone else had noticed.

The section also contained the Invocation that the old kraut actor had narrated.

*The hunger of the worms that feast  
On sacrificial goat.  
The yammers of the pious priest  
That echo till my song has ceased—  
Till he's devoured by a beast  
Who tears away his throat!*

The god was invited to please breathe life into "my humble creature builded in Your image." Begged the narrator: "Make him truly Your son."

In the final section, "The Creation," the creature rose. It was described: it had its parent's "lidless eyes and lipless mouth," "and poison in its glance, and in its touch"; it was a thing "that fastens with its hands and won't let go."

With a single mad gesture the narrator commanded it—"Rise, thou, and do thy Father's bidding. Teach us to fear."

Here the poem ended. As if to prevent any reader from lingering too long under the spell of its gloomy last lines, it was followed, on the same page, by a breezy drawing of a group of Union students sunning themselves on the lawn beside the college chapel.

If Nadelman thought for a moment that he was out of the woods—and for brief periods at the office on Thursday, he did—he was quickly set straight, for on Friday he returned shampooed and showered from his lunchtime workout at the gym to find a phone message from Huntoon waiting for him: *Went upstairs this morning & the only thing I found was its gloves.*

"He said you'd know what he meant," the secretary said, with a

tiny lift of her tweezed eyebrows to signal commiseration.

Nadelman nodded. "Yeah, I do. It's good news, in fact." Even as he said it, he wasn't sure, but he forced himself to smile as he rounded her desk and continued into his office, telling himself that it *was* good news. Maybe the thing had been eaten by the birds. Didn't seagulls live on garbage?

That night he stayed out past twelve, ostensibly from having bar-hopped with two old Union alums just in from the Coast, but in fact from having spent a celebratory evening with Cele in her rent-controlled apartment on Ninth Street. Waiting for him on the kitchen table, alongside a tuition bill from Michael's school and an L.L. Bean catalog, was another postcard from Huntoon, this one a black-and-white view of the Long Beach boardwalk at midseason—a view that stirred memories of his childhood, even as he read the postmark and realized that the card had obviously been mailed several days before, in response to Nadelman's include-me-out letter. He studied the picture for almost a minute in an effort to put off reading Huntoon's message, searching the boardwalk and beach for a small, skinny boy in the photo that could have been himself.

Giving up, he swallowed and read the card.

*I dont see how you can deny the God. He says He knows you.  
He did breathe life into His servant just like in the song & He's  
everything you said He was. Well you did get one thing wrong,  
He does have a name. He's called The Hungerer.*

Rhoda had, touchingly, been waiting up for him, lying propped up in bed immersed in last month's *Commentary*—something he would never have found Cele doing—or at least pretending to be immersed in it so as to make a pretty picture when he came into the room. Maybe half-consciously she suspected what was going on, harmless though Nadelman swore to himself it was. Either way, he felt guilty.

Or maybe it was Huntoon's little kiss-off that bothered him, that bit about "The Hungerer." Nadelman sensed a wolfish smirk in it, like a tiny twisted vein of poison. It gnawed at him, that phrase. And he knew why, too.

"This sounds absolutely crazy," he told Rhoda, as he sat on the bed after recounting—in just enough detail, he hoped—his evening's adventures at a trio of Yorkville bars. "The guy's really got me spooked. It's like he's reading my mind. I'm sure I've seen that phrase somewhere before."

"In the rock song?" There was impatience in her voice. He knew she wanted him under the sheets with her.

"No, that's just it. It doesn't appear in the song, I'm sure of that. And it's not in the *Unicorn*, either. But somehow I still associate it with the goddamn poem."

She looked blank, unwilling to be drawn into the game. "So?" she said at last. "Where's it from?"

He shrugged. "I just don't know. It could be in my original typescript."

"But you would have handed that in to the magazine."

"Yes, but I may still have the carbon."

Until uttering those words, he hadn't decided on what he would do. But now he realized that he couldn't go to bed without assuring himself that Huntoon was mistaken. Guiltily he stood, promising his wife he'd be back in a few minutes, but knowing she would probably be asleep by the time he returned. It was just as well; he doubted he could summon up much passion for her tonight anyway.

"Close the door when you go out," she said tonelessly. Before he had shut it behind him, she had already snapped off the light.

He had no trouble finding the carbon of the poem; right below the stack of old *Unicorns* he saw it, a sheaf of onionskins fastened with a rusty staple. One seldom came across such things anymore in these days of the Xerox machine. He recognized, in the smeared black ink, the slightly uneven letters of his old second-hand Royal portable.

He scanned the poem quickly, though carefully enough to see that it was the same as the published version. There was nothing in it, not a single line, about the Rival God's having a name. The discovery came as a relief: Huntoon stood revealed as just another madman, not even in touch with reality, much less with a god.

He was about to put away the suitcase once again, but the thought of rejoining his wife, of tiptoeing back to that darkened room and sliding sheepishly into the bed where she lay angry and unfulfilled, made him pause; or perhaps it was simply that he knew he'd blame himself if he gave up the hunt so soon. He would have to go all the way back to his original draft; it was worth the extra effort to make absolutely sure Huntoon was wrong.

Below the carbon typescript—bless his retentive nature!—was yellow legal-sized pad containing the handwritten draft of the original manuscript. He could see, even at the top, that he'd tried out several different titles: "Return of the Master." "Advent of the Master." "The Post-Modern Prometheus." "The Eighth Day of Creation." How solemn he had been in those days!

One long yellow sheet was a rat's-nest of scribbles and cross-outs. Why, he wondered, had he bothered to save such stuff, this

evidence of an inconstant purpose, of a disordered mind? Probably out of the same sense of self importance that had led him to write the poem in the first place. He'd believed-hoped, at least-that someday someone would want to retrace step by step, phrase by phrase, his proudest act of creation.

But he'd never expected that the someone would be him, and with so insane a purpose.

How obsessively he had fussed with things. Almost every line in the poem had undergone minor variations and alterations. "The idol of the abattoir" had started out life sans alliteration as "the idol of the slaughterhouse." The "god who stinks of carrion" had debuted more crudely as "a god who reeks of rotting meat"; no doubt he'd found "carrion" more poetic and hadn't been able to come up with a suitable midline rhyme for "reeks." (Listed in the margin beside it, shamelessly, were *beaks, cheeks, leaks, peaks, speaks, shrieks*, each one neatly crossed out.)

Funny, the things that had concerned him as a young man. There'd been lots of shuffling between "a god that" and "a god who," as if that were a matter of great moment. Curiously, one of the lines describing the creature—"That fastens with its hands and won't let go"—had originally been "that fastens with its hands and *can't* let go." The latter image was curiously disturbing; he wondered how he'd ever come up with it.

He was about to put the yellow sheets away when he came across a discarded line from the bottom of the seventh section. Above the couplet that, in the final draft, he'd settled on -

*I'll set it free to murder and maraud,  
To serve the dictates of the nameless god*

-he saw an alternate line that he'd rejected, perhaps for want of a proper rhyme. There it was, right beside the newer version, carefully crossed out with three blue lines through it-his original thought:

*To serve the dictates of The Hungerer.*

For a moment, his eyes refused to focus in it; the pages seemed heavy in his hand. He remembered something Nicky had once told him back in college, about how you could disprove thousands upon thousands of phony haunted-house stories, reports of apparitions, UFO sightings, claims made by psychics and charlatans-but if even a single ghost or spell or saucer could truly be proved to exist, that one example would change everything forever. Grant the reality of

a single spirit and you found yourself faced with an entire cosmos of them. And it dawned on him, suddenly, that this was what had happened—that, in an instant, everything had changed: those two small words that stared at him from the page, eleven scribbled letters barely an inch long, had punched a single tiny hole in his universe, like the hole at the bottom of a bucket. He sat there, staring dumbly, as all his certainties leaked out.

Just as quickly he reached for explanations. These pages he'd been studying—might Huntoon, somehow, have seen them too? But where? Not even the editors of the *Unicorn* had seen this early draft. Nadelman himself had forgotten what was in it, much less that he'd ever penned that phrase.

The Hungerer . . .

What was it Huntoon had said? "He knows you."

Impossible, he told himself. *Impossible!* He just plain wasn't going to admit it into his world. He felt a sudden affection for the yokel in the old joke, the one who, visiting the zoo, gazes wide-eyed at the giraffe towering above him, higher and stranger than anything in creation has a right to be, and declares, "There ain't no such animal."

From outside came a low metallic scraping, followed by a clatter. It sounded as if it had come from just beyond his window, but he knew how sound carried in the city; three floors up was just like being on the sidewalk. He stood and peered down from the hall window. A trash can was lying on its side in the street, its lid beside it, like a mugged man whose hat had been knocked off. Vandalism, and for no reason except that the kids knew they got away with it these days; last week they'd painted swastikas on the old grey temple two blocks to the west and had smashed one of its rosy stained-glass windows. Well, he'd felt like smashing windows himself once. Above the street the narrow strip of sky was overcast, with no light but a cloudy yellow smudge that might have been the moon.

Warily he turned back to his problem, as if to an opponent who, while he'd lingered at the windowsill, had been standing behind him, waiting patiently. The possibility that Huntoon was right—that there *was* a being out there, that it had spoken to him, that all the words of Jizzmo's song were true—was just too preposterous to consider. After all, dammit, hadn't he himself made the whole thing up? He even remembered the circumstances of the writing: his dorm room, his desk shoved up against the wall at one end and his roommate's at the other, each with its own depressing little gooseneck lamp; the dreary winter afternoons, coming back from the library with an armload of poetry anthologies to inspire him, and which he'd be bringing back the following day; the snow against the window as he typed

the final draft, painstakingly whitening out his mistakes, as if the snow were covering his tracks. He'd been touched by no divine inspiration; the poem had been a thing of lowly choices, word after word. The influences on it were easy enough to trace; he could point to the origin of virtually every line.

The reference to the Fabricant's "living up an alley / in a house with poisoned glass" had been based on a boyhood superstition in his town, something about an old abandoned house near the ocean reputed to have "poison windows" it was dangerous to break. (The tale had probably been started by some real estate agent.) The creature with "its arms stuck from its head" had been a family joke—a bedraggled old stuffed seal that Nadelman had owned as a child, and which had been repaired this way after most of its stuffing had been lost. The monster's "lidless eyes and lipless mouth" had been inspired by the *Black Lagoon* movies they'd shown at Union on Friday nights. The line about "The god of Mars, of battles lost and won, / Who gives us stars but takes away the sun"—that had been lifted from Swinburne. He was certain of this because next to it he'd written "Swinburne, p.59."

The page number, he knew, referred to the old leather-bound notebook, his aunt's bar mitzvah gift. He retrieved it from the pile. Originally it had come equipped with one of those slim silver Mark Cross pens that were so uncomfortable to hold, but now the loop was empty. So were half the pages of the notebook; years ago he had turned to other projects and never gone back to it. On page 59 appeared the lines

*The lord of love and loathing and of strife  
Who gives a star and takes a sun away*

from Swinburne's "Atalanta in Calydon."

Idly he flipped through the earlier sections of the book, marveling at how little his handwriting had changed over the years. He was still the same boy who'd written, "Wonder if the high school year-book is the only thing I'll ever get to autograph," and "If God's so great, how come Rabbi Rosen smells like old potatoes?" There were dozens of fantasies about girls—"Linda J., all the more naked because of her freckles," "Margie D., nipples like a baby's thumbs"—and quotations from whatever he'd been reading, from *Kidnapped* to *The Catcher in the Rye*.

He had gone through the notebook while composing his poem, ransacking it for images and ideas, much as Coleridge had done before he fell asleep and dreamed up "Kubla Khan." And obviously the



book had proved a treasure trove. Here, on page 46, was the story about the brain's resemblance to a Portuguese man-o'-war, which he'd used in the Chant of the Fabricant. Earlier, on page 40, was the note about man-eating plants "that slide up travellers' nostrils whilst they sleep"; it had appeared in his Hymn to Corruption. The references to "the Insect God" in the same section of the poem had come from an anecdote on page 33, which he'd written on a mosquito-plagued camping trip in Maine.

On the page just before it was a Mencken quotation that had obviously influenced him—it spoke of "a Creator whose love for His creatures takes the form of torturing them"—and beneath it lay the lines from *Melmoth the Wanderer* that had given him the "Who goes there?" passage in Part III:

*Who is among us?—who?—I cannot utter a blessing while he is here.  
I cannot feel one. Where he treads, the earth is parched!—where he  
breathes, the air is fire!—where he feeds, the food is poison!—where  
he turns, his glance is lightning!—Who is among us?—Who?*

From the street came a squeal of brakes and, with it, the blare of a horn. He got to the window in time to see a car's retreating taillights as it sped toward Second Avenue. The early-morning clouds had parted, and a chilly moon a few days short of full hung just above the tenements at the poorer end of the block. The street in both directions was deserted, save for movement directly below him as a lone figure hurried past his building, so close to its base that Nadelman could barely see more than a flash of green coat and a gleaming pink bald skull. Something shiny in the figure's hand caught the light as he rounded the corner of the building, heading toward the line of stores, parked cars, and pay phones on the avenue.

Frowning, Nadelman returned to the notebook, wondering about that large pink skull. Surely Halloween was over.

Studiously keeping the night's unanswerable questions sealed off from the rest of his thoughts, as if in a tiny water-tight bag, he plunged back into his literary excavations, moving further into the past. On page 27, in the midst of some passages of nature description, he was struck by a pair of lines whose diction seemed to foreshadow that of the poem.

*With enemies who tremble at His glance,  
And followers who shamble at His feet.*

He hadn't realized that his ideas had been germinating for so long;

he couldn't have been more than sixteen when he'd written that entry. Three pages before it, he found the same thought in a slightly different form:

"He cometh. The ground doth shake. His enemies fly before Him. His followers shamble in His wake."

A similar reference, expressed somewhat more primitively, appeared on page 22:

*He wakens. Come He will:  
A rival god who means us ill*

And even earlier, on page 19:

*There's something up there who means to do us harm.*

It was on page 11 that he saw it—two simple words on a line all their own, written without explanation:

*The Hungerer*

He sat there dumbfounded, the words burning themselves into his brain like a squiggle of hot wire.

Suddenly the cheap plastic one-piece telephone hanging from the kitchen wall gave a single startled chirp, echoed immediately by a ringing from the bedroom.

Nadelman was on his feet and dashing toward the kitchen before it rang again, hoping it hadn't awakened Rhoda and fearful that it might, just might, be Cele, reaching out to him in the grip of some post-coital passion. He yanked the thing from its plastic cradle.

"Hello?" His voice was louder than he'd intended, and the silence afterward stretched on too long. "Hello?"

There was no voice in reply, just the sound of wind, a hint of far-off traffic.

He was about to whisper Cele's name, when it occurred to him that it couldn't be her on the line; he intentionally hadn't given her his new unlisted number. Softly he replaced the receiver.

This is crazy, he told himself. He'd had the number changed less than two weeks ago and was already getting crank calls.

Perhaps it was the thought of cranks that triggered it—the sudden realization of who the caller had been.

Huntoon, of course; who else? The unlisted number was clearly no hurdle; if the man was able to divine what lay buried in Nadelman's old notebooks and to fathom a god's secret name, he could certainly

figure out a phone number. Maybe, in some mysterious but no doubt perfectly logical way that would someday be explained by science, he'd contrived to read Nadelman's mind.

Unless, perhaps, he had somehow managed to gain entry into the apartment . . .

Nadelman's eyes strayed to the window, but he was thinking again of the phone call. What he'd heard in the background had been traffic, he was sure of it. On impulse he returned to the kitchen and peered through its grimy side window overlooking the corner and, across Second Avenue, a lonely pair of pay phones. Squinting, he moved closer. At first it looked as if there were a body curled at the foot of one of them, but the headlights of a passing car revealed that it was only a sack of garbage someone had left piled there.

He was tempted to call Huntoon back and talk to him—there were so many things he needed to ask—but it was far too late at night, especially with the guy's old mother probably asleep hours ago. He contented himself with muttering "creep!" for the dozenth time that night and resolved to phone Huntoon in the morning.

He returned one more time to the notebook, wondering what in the world had possessed him to write that stark, disturbing name in the middle of page 11. One thing he noticed, as he studied the pages that preceded and followed the entry, was that this particular section was filled with childhood dreams. Maybe he had recently read a paperback on the subject, or maybe it was the influence of some friend at school; in any case, he appeared to have been much taken with his dreams in those days, faithfully recording them each morning in all their perplexing detail.

He read through a few such entries. "In a meadow, like the one at camp, only there's a city at the edge of it . . ." "In study hall, it's really hot, and then this girl comes in . . ." He soon gave up. They were alien, boring, like the dreams of another person. They meant nothing to him.

He forced himself to read a few more. Despite the subtlety and detail with which his daytime fantasies were composed, most of his dreams tended to be trite, childish affairs, the crudest of melodramas, like fleeing from a lion, or holding a bear at bay on the other side of a door. The most common of all, whose meaning needed no explanation, involved wandering through the corridors of foreign hotels searching vainly for a bathroom.

He envied those whose dream worlds were built on a grander scale, opulent and colorful as a Hollywood epic—like Lovecraft's, which provided the plots of his stories, and Fuseli's, which were so vivid the artist would eat red meat before going to bed in the hope of inducing

them. Kubla Khan's Xanadu, the subject of Coleridge's grand dream, had itself been inspired by another dream half a millennium before, the Emperor having conceived its design in his sleep, complete with stately pleasure dome.

Maybe, in the same way, he himself had conceived of "The Hungerer." Perhaps those very words had been the product of a dream. Was that why he'd committed them to his notebook? Now that he thought about it, he did seem dimly to remember waking up one morning and jotting the phrase down, just as he'd done with other dreams.

Or was this simply his imagination? Why, after all, would he have scribbled two mysterious words and stopped right there?

Behind him, in the kitchen, the telephone emitted another chirp. He jumped to his feet and answered it.

"Hello?" His voice, this time, was guarded.

No answer. Again the whisper of traffic, then a closer, more intimate sound, like the soft, deliberate, liquid stir of mud-mud opening its jaws, yearning to speak words. A tiny click now, and someone breathed directly in his ear. "Hello?" It was his wife's voice, hoarse from sleep. He heard the shift of sheets.

"It's okay, honey. Just a crank. Go back to sleep."

He heard a muffled crackling, as of crumpled paper pressed against the speaker of the phone. He doubted it came from the bedroom.

"Hang up, honey. It's okay."

He waited until she got off the line, then gave vent to his fury. "Listen," he said, trying to keep from shouting, "I know it's you, Huntoon, and it isn't goddamn funny. You want to talk? Okay, good-let's talk!"

He waited. There was no sound.

"Okay, schmuck, have it your way! I'm just going to call you back, and I don't give a shit if I wake up your mother."

Trembling, he hung up, then picked up the phone again and dialed 516 information.

There was an unexpected delay in finding the number. "No," the operator said at last, "we have no one by that name in Long Beach. Are you sure that's the right spelling?"

Then Nadelman remembered: there'd been no return number on either of Huntoon's two phone messages. In fact, the secretary had said something about his sounding "like he's calling from a bar." Maybe the guy had no phone. Maybe he always called from phone booths . . .

Nadelman hurried back to the window. There was no one standing at the pay phones on the corner. Even the bag of garbage that had

been lying there was gone.

The kitchen suddenly felt very cold. All he wanted now was to slide into his cozy, wife-warmed bed. Wearily he scooped up his college papers, like a child putting away toys, and dumped them back in the suitcase. He stared at the notebook for a moment, but knew he didn't dare reopen it, and dumped it in on top of the magazines.

He flipped one last time through the scribbled yellow manuscript of the poem; here, in this hodge-podge of handwriting, cross-outs, and arrows, was the jungle where the mystery lurked. On the next-to-final page, right after the Invocation, another crossed-out passage caught his eye—not just a line, this time, and not merely rearranged wording, but an entire four-line rhyme; imprisoned on the page behind a row of heavy X's, it had never made it into the typed version. Aside from the god's name, it appeared to be the only element in the poem that had been totally altered. The substituted passage, printed neatly beside it, was much easier to read—"Success at last!/Across the miles of space/Appear the vast/proportions of His face"—but Nadelman could just make out, through the latticework of X's, the original lines:

*The ritual works!  
for God at last breaks through—  
A god who smirks  
and says, "The joke's on you!"*

Saturday, drizzly as somehow it had to be, he slept late, as if unwilling to leave the world of dreams, however shabby they might be compared to Kubla Khan's. He lay in bed long after Rhoda had gotten dressed and gone off to her indoor tennis lesson, then spent the afternoon with Michael, whom he'd promised to take to Macy's for new boots and another in a long line of pocket video games. All day, so much that even the boy noticed, he remained grave and uncommunicative, weighing how he was going to deal with the new facts in his life, like one who's just received bad news from the doctor.

On Sunday, a day set aside for visiting Rhoda's parents in New Rochelle, Nadelman bowed out of the expedition.

"I've got to confront this Huntoon character," he said over breakfast. "The creep's driving me crazy, he's a terrible pest, and he could mean real trouble some day."

"I'm worried about you going out there all alone," said Rhoda, solicitous in a way she hadn't been in years. "How do you know he's not dangerous?"

"Well, he seems to take awfully good care of his mother."

"Sure," she said, "and good care of his record collection. That

doesn't mean anything. I just don't think it's a good idea to go challenging people like that. You don't know what he might be capable of. I've read those letters."

"Look, I'm not going to challenge the guy," said Nadelman. "I'm going to be very very nice to him. You know how nice I can be, once I get going."

"I'd almost forgotten." She gave him a worried smile. "What bothers me is the thought of him getting you inside his house. Why don't you just meet him at some coffee shop somewhere? Wouldn't that be safer?"

"I keep telling you, honey, he doesn't have a phone. I have to go inside just to talk to him."

"Well, if you still insist on schlepping all the way out there, at least don't stay long. Just poke your head in and tell him to come for a walk or something. I don't like the idea of you going inside that house. God knows what he's got in there."

"What's he got in his house, Mommy?" asked Michael. He waited in vain for an answer. "What's he got in his house, Daddy?"

"I've heard he's got all the handkerchiefs you keep losing," Nadelman said, pushing himself back from the table. "And all the gloves."

Michael gave a shout of laughter until Rhoda hushed him. "Sweetie, go inside and get your shoes on. We don't want to be late to Grandpa's." When he was out of the room the worry returned to her face. "Honey, I mean it. Promise me you'll speak to him outside. And don't let him take you on that roof."

"I promise," he lied.

He drove the two of them to Penn Station, then kissed them both goodbye as he slid from the car and left the wheel to Rhoda. Watching them drive away, he felt a quickening sense of excitement, as if he were a boy setting off alone on an adventure, in pursuit of some unknown he would have to face squarely, eyeball to eyeball, the way Davy Crockett had grinned down bears. His train, waiting noisily for him in the depths of the station, was a great silver tube that would carry him to the sea—and to knowledge. As he found his seat and heard the doors slide irrevocably shut, he felt his heart beat faster, and reminded himself that he was merely going to see a man who had somehow managed to read his mind. It had to be a trick; and it was one he had to learn.

He settled back in his seat with *Advertising Age* and *The New Yorker*, and only when the conductor came to take his fare did he notice the woman seated across the aisle from him, idly picking her nose as she

sat immersed in a paperback. On her left cheek, jagged and obscene-looking, was an upside-down five-pointed star. Life had clearly taken its meat cleaver to her—her face was lined, the skin sagging and roughened—but he recognized her, after a moment, as the homely, pockmarked girl he'd seen ten years before in the S & M bar in Chelsea. Only then she had been naked from the waist up and had worn a pair of chains across her chest. Now she sat bundled up like a child in a light blue quilted ski-jacket. The design on her cheek now looked old and pale instead of dark, like the scar from a bygone operation. Wrinkles had formed amid the lines of the star, like vines growing over a trellis.

Christ, he told himself, it really *had* been a brand! These people were for real. He was intrigued to see her in mufti, looking so ordinary, and to think that he alone knew her secret. Unattractive as she was, he found himself aroused by the memory of those small naked breast. How bizarre she had looked, there in the crowd; how brazenly she'd marched from man to man! Was there anything a woman like this wouldn't do?

Leaning in her direction, he attracted her attention by waving the magazines. "Excuse me," he called, "didn't I once see you in a bar on Twenty-first Street?"

She glanced up with none of the suspicion a normal woman might have displayed. "You mean the Chateau?"

"That's right."

She grinned, showing her gums. It was not a pretty grin; her teeth were long and yellow. "Yeah, that was me," she said, her face a mixture of embarrassment and pride. She'd been sitting next to the window, but now she slid into the aisle seat. "Wow, I'm so amazed you recognized me." She pronounced it *reckinized*; there was more than a hint of Brooklyn in her voice.

"Well, you made a pretty strong impression," he said, reluctant to tell her he had merely recognized the brand.

"I don't think I remember you," she said. "Were you a member?"

He shook his head. "No, in fact I only went once."

"I went every Thursday night," she said proudly. "I never missed a single open house, as long as the club lasted."

"It closed down?"

"Uh-huh, it must've been—oh, four or five years ago, at least."

He nodded politely, wondering who else in the car might be listening to their conversation. "I'm sorry to hear that."

"I'm not," she said. "I haven't been part of that scene in years. I'm miles beyond that now."

He stared at her. "You mean, even rougher stuff?"

"No, I'm trying to channel more energy into the spiritual side of my nature. That other bullshit, it was like eating junk food, you know? What I'm doing now is getting integrated with who I once was."

"Ah." Nervously he clutched his *Ad Age*.

"I found out that I used to be a sorceress in a tribe of Celts."

Nadelman nodded, smiling, but he was already depressed.

"And before that I was a sybil in a pharaoh's court."

"Amazing!" It was invariably the celebrities these people claimed to have been—never the commoners, the peasants. "And where are you off to now?" he asked. "Some kind of meeting?"

"Oh, no," she said, giggling, "I'm seeing my girlfrin' Linda." The phrase came out like a single ceremonial title. "She used to work in my department at Woolworth's, but she got a job with the phone company and I haven't seen her since summer. I get off at Kew Gardens. See, she's only four blocks from the station." She paused, twirling a strand of hair around her fingers. "Where you going?"

"Oh, out to Long Beach," he said.

"That's a long way's away." She thought a moment. "My friend's grandmother got put in one of those nursing homes out there. You from there?"

He shook his head. "I haven't seen the place since I was around ten. I had an aunt who rented a house near the boardwalk, and my family used to visit in the summer. We lived a couple of towns over, in Woodland Park."

"Oh, sure," she said. "I know where that is." She picked at something on her nose. "You stopping there, too?"

Nadelman shrugged. "I hadn't planned on it."

"You should. Believe me, it's no good to lose contact with the past—bad things can happen. You get cut off from things."

Her stop had come. Standing, she smiled her toothy smile and patted the book she'd been reading so that Nadelman could see the title: *Discover Your Past Lives*.

He hadn't been back to Woodland Park in—how many years had it been? His family had moved to Rye in the late 1950s—around two years after his bar mitzvah, he recalled—and just before his mother had retired to Florida in '77 she'd made a trip back there on her own. She had wanted him to accompany her, but there'd been some kind of crisis at the office and he'd been unable to get away. That's right, the Ocean Spray account, which had later fallen through. So how long had it been? . . . God! Nearly thirty years.

The train reached Woodland Park shortly after one. The first thing Nadelman noticed was that they had modernized the station. Step-



ping from the train, he wondered if anything from his childhood would be left. He had checked the timetable and knew he'd have nearly an hour and a half to walk around. Whistling tunelessly, he buttoned up his coat, dug his hands in his pockets, and headed toward the main street of the town.

Two blocks from the station, he passed his old brick grammar school; it was still standing, like some huge empty monument to his childhood. The building looked the same as he remembered it, but a decade ago, with the post-Baby Boom shortage of children in the area, it had been turned into an administrative center; the playground, he could see, was now a parking lot, inhabited only by ghosts. Its high metal fences, today guarding nothing but a Mercator-like grid of white lines, had once enclosed a microcosm of humanity: lovers, adventurers, bullies and their victims, team players, compromisers, and, somewhere, the misfits. Nadelman walked on, not caring to look back; thank heaven Michael went to a small school.

The village looked much the same too, though once again it was only the buildings themselves that stood unchanged; the individual signs they bore were new. The bright front windows of a computer store and a shop that sold nothing but jogging shoes made a strange contrast to the old brick buildings that housed them, like modern pictures set in ancient frames, but it was the frames that interested him more. He saw, above one window, a plaque that said "1943," and his heart beat faster. That woman on the train had been right; he was glad he'd come. He had made a great unexpected loop in time, returning himself to the center of things.

Still whistling, he left the village behind and strolled past blocks of suburban homes that looked cozy and secure against the grey November sky. The frontyards stood empty today, except for a teenager in one of the driveways, waxing his Toyota. The rest were probably inside watching football. Recognizing the outlines of a wide Queen Anne-type house that stood on the corner, Nadelman turned down the curving little lane where he had lived, forcing himself not to break into a run as he passed two more large homes, a smaller red Cape Cod, a row of evergreens; he was trying to prolong the anticipation.

But as he came to his own block, he saw at once, with a pang, that all the homes along one side, his house and three neighboring ones, had been replaced by a line of new split-levels, their lawns quite bare of trees. He walked for several blocks more, then doubled back, searching like a lost dog for the scent of home. But there was no getting around it: the old house was gone, and with it a large chunk of his past. Memories had been lost that could never be reclaimed.

And yet the past was here, all around him now; he could feel it, he could smell it in the faint scent of the ocean. As he walked tiredly back toward the station, already thinking of the water that lay miles ahead, he told himself that he was traveling toward the one dependable element from his boyhood, the one thing history couldn't change.

Long Beach was just over the bridge, on an eight-mile-long sandbar running parallel to the mainland. The railroad station stood near the center of the main commercial avenue, lined with banks, shopping plazas, and synagogues. Nothing looked familiar.

It was after three by the time he located Huntoon's street, as far inland as one could get on that narrow strip of oceanfront suburbia, several blocks up from the old wooden boardwalk that connected the town's hotels and nursing homes. Locust Court was a dowdy little pocket of garden apartments and multifamily houses, a world of privet hedges, peeling paint, and narrow, broken sidewalks. Even on this cold November afternoon, the air held a hint of sour cooking smells, like the hallway of a tenement. The street was deserted except for a wrinkled old man in a ski-jacket and felt hat with earflaps, his breath visible as he bent to gather the dead leaves and trash that had accumulated beneath the sagging green wire fence bordering one of the private homes. From somewhere behind him came the faint sounds of a playground, though Nadelman didn't remember passing any children. In the distance he thought he heard the pounding of the surf, but maybe it was only the wind. He was all turned around here, in this landlocked little enclave, though he was fairly certain that beyond the furthest row of rooftops, the ocean began.

Number 1152, the shabbiest house on the block, was a half-timbered stucco building that stood flush with the sidewalk. Two cars were parked in the driveway, its sparse gravel overgrown with weeds, and another two were visible in the open garage in the rear. He wondered if one of them was Huntoon's.

That name appeared at the top of a column of doorbells, like the grand prize question in a quiz show. Nadelman pressed the bell, noticing, as he did so, the name immediately below it—Braverman. Those must be the people Huntoon was so eager to throw a scare into. Neighbors.

He was just about to ring again when the door gave a loud, unsteady buzz and admitted him. The tiny lobby, masked by shadows, looked badly used, like a child's playroom. Someone had crayoned a crude design on the wall, the image of a dog defecating. As he climbed the narrow stairs he heard, four flights above him, the sound of a door being opened.

"Arly?" It was an old woman's voice, but it still had muscles in it. "You forgot the key?"

He paused on the stairs. "Mrs. Huntoon? I'm the guy Arlen's been writing to. The one who wrote that song."

"You're Nadelman?"

"That's right. May I come up?" Without waiting for a reply he continued climbing, fueled by the nervousness he'd been feeling all weekend.

"Arly's out," she was saying, as he rounded the final flight. There was the trace of an accent in her voice, but he couldn't place it. By the time he reached her front door, panting despite his workouts at the gym, she had the chain on the door.

"I ain't so sure I ought to let you in."

He saw a pale slice of her head, wavering back and forth in the opening, as if to give him the fullest view possible; her mouth was grim.

"Jesus, Mrs. Huntoon," he said, catching his breath. "I came an awfully long way to see you two." He'd be damned if he'd go trotting back down those stairs.

"Well, I guess he's due home soon." The door closed, and he heard a scrabbling against the wood; then it opened to admit him. "This place ain't fit to be seen. We don't get many visitors." She was still shaking her head over some private worry. He recognized her from the photograph, a small, stout, grey-haired woman with a face like a Cabbage Patch doll. She had not, then, been the one who took the pictures.

"I would have called first," he said, "but you don't seem to have a phone."

The woman frowned, still distracted. "No, they came and took that out." She looked around, scratching at the creases in her forehead. The house dress she wore was wrinkled and not very clean, as if she'd been asleep in it. "Arly's going to be here soon enough, I guess. He'll be surprised we got a visitor."

Clearly visitors were rare. The front room, with a threadbare rug and one small window to let in the light, was a jumble of cushions, old clothes, and magazines. Three broken-backed chairs were grouped like old-age pensioners around a large TV set with flares of aluminum foil attached with tape to its antenna. The room obviously saw a lot of use; there were dirty cups and dishes on the little table in front of the TV, and the air smelled faintly of garbage. Dog-eared issues of *Prevention*, *Fate*, and *TV Guide* lay strewn about the furniture, cookie crumbs sprinkled on their covers. Lying on one of the chairs, spine cracked, was a paperback: *Stranger Than Science: 73 Fully*

*Documented Case Histories That Science Is Powerless to Explain.*

"This place has gone to pot ever since Arly got laid off," said the woman, settling herself in the chair by the window. Nadelman sat tentatively beside her.

"How long ago was that?"

"Just after Labor Day. All they said was they didn't want him to drive for them anymore. He had a perfect safety record."

"Who'd he work for?"

"A firm in Valley Stream. They deliver to stores—albums and things. Green Acres, Gimbel's, other places. That's how he got interested in that music." She pursed her lips. "They said he was stealing, but you and I both know he wasn't. He was just listening to the songs."

Nadelman nodded. "That's a shame. I'm glad, at least, that my song was one of them."

"Oh, he's a fan of yours now. He loves your work, Arly does."

From outside came the crunch of gravel in the driveway. They heard a car motor stop, followed by the slamming of a door. Mrs. Huntoon inclined her face slightly toward the window, her eyes narrowing. "It's him now. He's going to get a surprise, seeing you here." She looked worried.

"One reason I came," said Nadelman, seizing what time was left to speak to the woman alone, "was to see your son's handiwork—the thing that he based on my song. Is it still up there on the roof?"

She shook her head, the loose flesh below her chin wobbling back and forth for emphasis. "No, no, that's all gone. It was just up there for a couple of nights. Arly only meant it as a joke."

Nadelman smiled. "Yes, I thought so."

Downstairs a door slammed; they heard heavy footsteps on the stairs. "That'll be Arly," she said. Struggling to her feet, she went to the door and opened it. "Arly," she shouted, "guess who decided to pay us a visit." A grunt sounded amid the footsteps from the stairwell. "It's the one who wrote that song."

"Holy shit!" Moments later a large, hatchet-faced man burst into the apartment, looking more surprised than pleased. He was dressed like a redneck, in boots, sideburns, and a battered leather jacket. In his arms was an assortment of lumber with rusty nails protruding from it.

"I wanted to call first," Nadelman said again, "but you don't have a phone."

Huntoon nodded doubtfully. "Well, you're here now, so make yourself at home." From beneath the lumber he stuck out a huge hand. "I just got back from the dump over in Oceanside," he said, holding out the wood as if in evidence. "Had to get rid of some trash."

His eyes glared meaningfully at Nadelman, hinting at complicity. Nadelman pictured the creature from the photograph being summarily dumped into a heap of garbage. "And look what I found there!" he said, leaning the wood in the corner. "I can really use this stuff."

Nadelman eyed the rows of rusty nails. "You really like to build things, don't you?"

The other rubbed his hands and nodded. "That's right. Got me a real genius for it. Just like you've got one for magic." He suddenly looked guilty; his eyes darted to the wall behind Nadelman's head. "You know, I really did mean to frame your letter," he said. "I just haven't gotten around to it."

"Oh, I don't care about that," said Nadelman. "What I came out for was to talk."

Huntoon grinned. "Yeah, I thought you'd have to talk to me sooner or later." He seated himself in the largest chair and kicked off his boots, propping his feet on the table. "I had a premonition you'd be coming to me."

Nadelman sat down across from him, trying not to breathe too much of Huntoon's socks. "I haven't been avoiding you," he said. "I'd have contacted you before, if there'd been any way of reaching you."

"Oh, there are ways," said Huntoon. "There are ways of reaching anyone. I should think you'd know one or two yourself." Beside him his mother nodded solemnly.

"I'm afraid I depend on the telephone."

"Yeah?" Huntoon sneered. "What you want one of them things for? They just waste your money, and people talk nothing but nonsense and gossip about you behind your back."

"That's true," said Nadelman, like a nervous courtier. "Some people can be pretty malicious. Is that one of your problems with the Bravermans?"

Huntoon shook his head. "I don't have any problems with the Bravermans."

"They're away," the old woman added. "I heard Mrs. Braverman say they were going away. Florida, I think. Somewhere like that."

"Who are these people, anyway?" asked Nadelman. He decided to pursue this line until he met some resistance; then he'd back off.

"They're our neighbors," Huntoon smiled. "If you want to call 'em that."

"Yes, I saw," said Nadelman. "They live downstairs."

Huntoon's eyes narrowed; his smile grew wolfish. "Maybe they do and maybe they don't."

"They went away," said Mrs. Huntoon.

"I get the impression," said Nadelman, "that there's no love lost

between you."

Huntoon shrugged. "Let's just say we had some differences of opinion about a few things."

"Like what?"

"Like where you walk a dog, and about leaving dog shit all over a roof when there are people living down here who happen to want to walk up there."

So that was it, Nadelman thought. Now he understood. It didn't seem like much to him, but it obviously bothered the hell out of these people. "In that case," he said, "I hope you threw a good scare into them."

Huntoon snickered. "We threw a scare into them, all right! Didn't we, Mama?"

Mrs. Huntoon nodded. "And they won't be coming back too soon."

"I'll bet!" said Nadelman. He tried to imagine what the effigy on the roof must have looked like to someone walking up there in the dark. Or worse, Huntoon himself, dressed up as he had been in the photo. The poor bastards had probably fled the state, they'd been so scared. "Well, I guess things'll be cleaner up there for a while," he said. "Any chance I could go up and walk around?" He was looking for a way to get Huntoon alone; it would be easier to talk to him then.

Huntoon shrugged. "Suit yourself. There's nothing up there now. But we'll go, if you want."

The old woman reached for his arm. "Arly, you don't want to take him on the roof."

"Is there a problem?" asked Nadelman, already standing but ready to sit down again. The worry in the woman's voice made him think of Rhoda's words this morning, and he had a sudden vision of the burly Huntoon heaving him over the edge.

"No," said Huntoon. "No problem." He reached for his boots. "Come on, we'll take a look around."

The roof was one remaining flight up the stairs in the hall. At the top stood a dented iron door, partially ajar. Huntoon pushed through it, bright grey sky filling the doorway. From the distance came the sound of children's voices.

"See? Nothing here. Just like I told you." He gestured around.

Nadelman followed the sweep of his hand, not seeing anything he remembered from the photographs. The flat rooftop reminded him of an arena. He took deep gulps of the cool untainted air and gazed at the line of hotels in the distance, like monstrous spectators.

"You're right," he said. "But then, you also told me that on Friday. Your message said the thing had disappeared."

The other cocked his head, suddenly coy. "Yeah, that's right—it did."

"Where is it now?" asked Nadelman, already knowing the answer. "At the dump?" If Huntoon had hauled the thing out there today, he'd probably had a good reason. Perhaps it had scared the Braver-mans so badly that he'd thought it best to get rid of it.

Huntoon crossed his arms. "Maybe it's at the dump, and maybe it isn't. Maybe it came back last night—and maybe it didn't. I'm not saying anything without a lawyer."

"Why in the world would you need a lawyer?" asked Nadelman. Huntoon reminded him of a child who has a secret and wants everyone in the world to know it.

"Maybe I do and maybe I don't. That's for you and the rest of them to find out."

His mixture of bravado and evasiveness made Nadelman uncomfortable. Huntoon was big, and the roof was very high. "Well, it's none of my business anyway," he said. "I'm just glad I could help solve your little problem." He looked around. "At least I don't see any dog shit."

"You won't," Huntoon said bitterly. "It took me nearly two hours to clean it up last night." He examined the roof with a critical eye. "But now that it's light, I see I missed a thing or two." He stooped down and picked up something that gleamed in the waning sunlight.

"What's that?" asked Nadelman.

"Hold out your hand," said Huntoon, coming toward him. Nadelman backed away, the smaller boy on the playground. "Come on, hold out your hand. I'm not gonna hurt you." He dropped the thing into Nadelman's upturned palm.

Nadelman examined it. It was a jagged splinter of glass nearly two inches long and red as a ruby. He handed it back to Huntoon, remembering with distaste the shards of glass he'd seen in the early photograph, where the thing's hands should have been.

"Is this from where I think it's from?" he asked. "From your, uh, servant?"

Huntoon gave him a guarded look. "He's your servant just as much as mine. Seems to me, in fact, that he'd rather take his orders from you."

The man's use of the present tense unnerved him. "Well, at least you've finally solved the servant problem!"

"Maybe so." Huntoon didn't smile.

"And was this glass part of him?"

The other's face suddenly brightened. "That's right," he said. "I tossed in a couple of busted windows."

"Windows?" The thing had been bright red. "You mean, from a church?"

Huntoon shrugged. "A church, a temple—who gives a shit?" With a casual swipe of his arm he tossed it over the edge of the roof. "Come on, let's get out of here. I'm frozen."

Perhaps it was the power of suggestion, but Nadelman was shivering by the time they got back to the apartment.

After being out on the roof, he found the air inside even more sour; he could almost taste it. If he lingered here, it was possible that he could draw something more out of Huntoon, some hint as to the sources of his power, but he doubted he could stand being around the man much longer.

"I'm going to have to be leaving soon," he announced, as they sat facing one another across the little Formica table in the kitchen. They had moved here not because Huntoon had offered him anything to eat, but because the old woman was watching a game show on TV in the living room. "It's getting late, and there are only two trains left today." He would never be home before dark.

"Naw, it ain't late," said Huntoon, suddenly affable. He shoved his wrist toward Nadelman's face, like a fainted punch. "See? Just after three."

"You're kidding." Nadelman checked his Tourneau. It was already past four. "I'm afraid your watch must be broken, Arlen." He smiled cautiously. "Unless you operate on a different time from the rest of us."

Huntoon burst into laughter, echoing the TV in the next room. "I knew you were too smart to fall for it!" He tapped the face of his black plastic digital watch. "I keep this sucker set seventy minutes behind."

"Why?"

He flashed an extravagant grin. "To fuck people up. I hate it when people peek at my watch, you know? Let 'em buy one of their own."

Nadelman nodded. "Interesting." He had to get out of this place. Rhoda had been more right than she knew. "And now, I think I'm going to have to go."

Huntoon seemed to digest this, disappointment warring with relief. "Wait a second, wait a second." He leaned across the table, which bore a tiny plastic salt and pepper set in the shape of lobsters. "Where you going?"

"Back to the city."

"You gotta see my invention first. For playing albums backwards."

"Oh, right, right." Huntoon had written him about this. "I remember. Where is it?"



The other jerked his head toward the doorway. "In my room."

Huntoon's bedroom was the sort that would have intrigued Nadelman in the days of his boyhood two towns away, but now it looked like nothing but a junk shop, a particularly unsavory one. The shelves that filled one wall were laden with objects-souvenirs, talismans, a plastic crystal ball-that, standing alone, might have preserved a certain integrity; but piled atop one another, they had the air of a gallery of fetishes. A tiny octopus floated like an extracted organ in a jar of preservative. A smooth white shard of what looked like broken china was in fact, Nadelman later realized, a section of skull, not necessarily human. He recognized the thin aluminum rod leaning in the corner by the window as a mail-order blowgun; he might have mistaken it for a fishing pole, had not his own son once tried to send away for one. There were other weapons, too-a machete dangling from the knob on the closet door, and, along the bottom shelf, bayonets and sheath knives and a set of tiny silver throwing stars. Piles of paperbacks rested here and there against the walls, worming their way ceilingward like stalagmites. On the bookshelves *Slaves of the Gestapo* rubbed shoulders with *Psychic Self-Defense*. *Your Sexual Key to the Tarot* lay open on the nightstand, resting on a copy of *Symphony of the Lash*. Opposite the window hung a large color poster of Jizzmo-Rocco at the drums, mouth open wide in a silent scream; Ray clutching a mike, eyes glaring like a maniac's-and another of a group called Death Orchid. Taped above the unmade bed was a large pastel mandala, 1960s-style, with a familiar-looking upside-down star crayoned over it: the creep world's version of the Have-a-nice-day smiley face. Their trademark popped up everywhere.

"Mama never comes in here," Huntoon said off-handedly, fiddling with a turntable on the floor by the bed. "I don't allow her to. She'd just mess everything up."

"Are these things safe?" asked Nadelman, nervously examining a knife whose handle was a set of brass knuckles.

"Oh, yeah. You just have to know how to use 'em."

"Are you sure they're legal?"

"Listen," said Huntoon, suddenly angry, "that's another thing about old man Braverman. You know what that fucker did? He tried to deny me my constitutional right to own a gun. Hell, he damn near got me in trouble with the law."

"What do you need all these weapons for anyway?" asked Nadelman. He had taken a position near the doorway.

"I've got to protect my mother, don't I? I mean, Mama's housebound. She don't go out anymore."

The logic seemed twisted, but Nadelman didn't pursue it, for by

this time Huntoon had dragged forth his invention. It looked straightforward enough, a turntable mounted on a wooden base with an overturned motor to drive it in reverse via a short rubber belt. Eyes glistening with excitement, Huntoon played two cuts backward from a Judas Priest album, but Nadelman was unable to make out the references to Satan that the other assured him were there. Huntoon then did the same with Jizzmo's *Walpurgis Night* album. "It's even harder to pick up on this one," he explained, playing a section of "New God on the Block," "you really got to know what you're listening for"—but all Nadelman could hear was an alien wail that rose and fell endlessly, close enough to human to be frightening.

He studied the Jizzmo poster on the opposite wall. "Did you perform the Invocation in here?"

Huntoon looked up, startled. "No," he said. "On the roof. Don't you remember? You've gotta do it underneath the stars—beneath the void of space."

"Oh, yeah, I remember," said Nadelman, abashed to have forgotten his own poem. He felt more than ever like an imposter. "Speaking of that god of mine, there's something I've been meaning to ask you—how'd you know I called the thing 'The Hungerer'? Even I didn't remember that."

"I told you in the letter—He spoke to me."

But how did he communicate?"

"You know," said Huntoon. "The way a god's supposed to talk to you."

"You mean, with a Ouija board?"

Huntoon eyed him skeptically, as if Nadelman were putting him on. "Come off it, that stuff's for old ladies."

"Did a voice speak inside your mind, like the born-again claim?"

Huntoon shook his head. "No, I heard Him just as plain as I hear you. Just the other night, too. It's like the song says—I heard Him in the thunder."

Nadelman gasped. "And that's when he told you his name?"

The other nodded.

"Well—" Nadelman chose his words carefully—"it certainly came as news to me."

Huntoon's wolfish features widened in a grin. "Oh, come on, pal. You knew! Maybe it was even you that named Him."

Later, pondering Huntoon's words as he descended the stairs to the lobby, Nadelman recalled the unpleasant odor of garbage in the man's apartment, and realized that the smell had been the strongest in Huntoon's bedroom.

Hurrying away from the Huntoons', escaping from their squalid little neighborhood, he took deep breaths of the chilly air. It tasted good to him. But now he was hungry; Huntoon, that *goyische* jackass, had never thought to offer him so much as a glass of water. He knew he'd probably be able to find a candy bar at the station, but he yielded instead to the demands of his empty stomach and to the rush of nostalgia that had gripped him earlier that afternoon: he would make a brief pilgrimage to one more childhood haunt, the boardwalk several blocks away.

He knew it wouldn't be the same; it couldn't be. In those days, when he'd spent whole week-long stretches of his summers with his mother's brother's family at their rented yellow bungalow on Michigan Street, the street names had been a way of learning the states, the skies had been much bluer, the boardwalk down the block a place of fun and danger, of Ski-Ball coupons you collected for a prize, jelly apples that got you sticky, and dizzying Tilt-a-Whirl rides that rivaled Coney Island's. The town's commercial district; in his memory, was a frontier outpost to which one made forays, accompanied always by grownups, to stock up on comic books and candy, and to thumb endless stacks of pennies into the charm machines at the supermarket. The bland suburban landscape he found himself in now, on this grey November afternoon, was like waking up after a dream.

Checking the time once more before the last train, he strode past a succession of nearly deserted streets that led down to the boardwalk, hidden in places by the line of hotels that crowded up to it like great beasts before a wooden trough. Just off the main thoroughfare he found a brightly lit coffee shop at the end of a row of darkened stores; it was one of the few places he'd seen that still looked open.

There were only four people inside. The quiet fit his mood. An elderly man down the counter to his right was holding a newspaper up to his face, peering at the classifieds with the intensity of a lost motorist studying a map. It was Saturday's *Post*, already limp and tattered, grown old along with yesterday's news. Periodically the man would tap the ash from his cigarette into his empty coffee cup. Nadelman, ordering a cheeseburger and a Coke, found his gaze drawn, as it inevitably was, to the headline: SAMARITAN CRUSHED RETURNING 50¢. Another poor slob who had fallen victim to some god or other. When his burger arrived he stared at the greasy reddish liquid oozing from it onto his plate, and, momentarily

sickened, thought of a slaughter-house floor. Pushing the plate away, he ordered a melted cheese and tomato on toast.

What he really needed was to think. Reviewing the events of the afternoon, he realized what expectations he'd come with; he had arrived at Huntoon's half convinced, or at least hoping, that the man would prove to be a kind of home-grown sorcerer, wise and benign, the suburban version of some character out of Castaneda. He would reveal how he'd magically read Nadelman's mind or, with equal magic, gained entrance into Nadelman's private files. Anything to affirm that the god they had talked of so familiarly was merely a shared fiction.

But Huntoon had affirmed nothing. Indeed, judging from the stench in his room, he already had the makings of another creature hidden in his closet. And he'd refused to explain away The Hungerer.

Worse, in their final conversation Huntoon had all but suggested not only that the god was a reality, but that Nadelman himself was responsible for its existence.

Nadelman swirled the watery amber of his Coke and wondered if it could be true. "*Maybe*," Huntoon had said, "*it was even you that named Him*"—as if, on that forgotten day thirty years ago when he'd first inscribed "The Hungerer" in his crisp new leather notebook, he had introduced something new into the universe, something conjured up within his brain, a being that had sprung into existence with the mere stroke of his pen. (Unless, of course, he had dreamed it into existence, his notebook entry a mere record of the fact, a kind of birth certificate. Who could say where it had actually begun?)

Was it possible?—that, in some latter-day Naming of Names, he had given the god life in the very act of naming it, and given its flesh substance with every new line of his poem?

How weird that would be: the notion that the universe might in fact be listening to him, waiting upon his decisions, his carefully chosen words, responding to his commands. How had that line from the poem gone? "*'I'll create Me a Creator,' He would say*"—a god made to order!

But what a dreadful responsibility to contemplate! For it meant that he might in some way be the original cause of the very things that had always appalled and horrified him, all the work of the dark god he'd invented: the fathers stabbed, the mothers raped, the children left to starve.

To his right the old man stood and, before leaving, pointedly slid the paper toward him, proffering another cause for guilt, another death for which he was responsible: the hapless fifty-cent Samaritan.

The pages of the newspaper were greasy, but he couldn't resist

reading the story. The night clerk of a small midtown hotel had stepped out for his usual evening's sandwich. Upon returning to his post, he'd discovered that the cashier in the all-night deli had given him half a dollar's extra change; and, being an honest man and a good Christian, he'd informed his superior that he was going back to return it. Halfway there he'd been killed by a heavy chunk of cornice that had broken off the ledge of a building.

It was too perfect. The god had shown His hand too clearly. Dumb! Why, they'd be onto Him any day now.

He forced himself to scan the other stories, toying with the possibility that he was responsible for each of them as well. A Jersey mother and four kids had been killed when a drunk teenaged driver veered from his lane and plowed head-on into her car. (The teenager was in serious condition in a Passaic hospital, but Nadelman knew that he'd pull through.) Five members of a family in the Bronx, four of them children, had died in a fire that night. Arson was suspected. (And surely in the background there lurked a spurned husband, jealous lover, or unscrupulous landlord; and behind him, a god.) Police were still searching for the head of the dispatcher employed by a local trucking firm, whose mutilated body had been found earlier that week in the company's Long Island warehouse. The article hinted at Mafia connections. (Nadelman knew that the hit man would never be caught.)

Could something he'd created be responsible for such carnage? It was inconceivable.

Picking his teeth, Nadelman crossed the empty street and strolled the three blocks to the boardwalk. The beach beyond looked grey and ragged, littered near the water's edge with mounds of wood and garbage that had been washed up by the tide and would have to be removed before summer. Two old women in black overcoats were picking their way carefully over the sand, their backs bowed with age or concentration. Seagulls screamed overhead. Beyond the tidemarks the ocean plunged and retreated, hungry and disconsolate, spilling its power across a narrow barrier of sand.

Prey to its mood, he ascended the ramp to the boardwalk. The sun was sinking toward the line of hotels to the west; beyond them, far below the horizon, lay the city. Nadelman turned his back to the blinding glare and walked in the direction of an overturned lifeguard's stand, watching his shadow stretch an impossibly long way down the rough wood of the boardwalk.

Aged figures sat unmoving as gargoyles on the benches, many of them in *yarmulkes*, silently watching the ocean. There was nothing else for them here; everything was boarded up now—the few food

stands that had not been torn down, a tiny row of game booths whose corrugated metal gates were covered with graffiti. AMUSEMENT ARCADE, said the sign, the letters cracked and peeling.

He had known; in some buried memory, that it would be like this; he and his father or friends had often come here in the winter. This time of year had its own austere beauty—cold, lonely, and bracing. But the boardwalk was different today. The once-grand hotels, which, even when he'd been a boy, had had a certain shabby glamor, were now turned into rest homes and nursing homes, though they had kept their old names—the Paradise, the Palace, the King David Manor—as if in hope of some future resurrection. Elderly faces gazed blankly from their windows. Some of the figures who sat huddled on the benches out front, bundled up like babies, looked more dead than alive. One old bearded man sat folded up like a jackknife, eyes shut. Here and there tall black attendants stood like sentries beside rows of unmoving figures in aluminum wheelchairs, or walked with aching slowness down the boardwalk while their bent and shrunken charges clutched their arms. A bike rider sped by, wheels thrumming on the boards, then a jogger with a Walkman. Several of the younger faces Nadelman passed struck him as crazy: vacant of expression, or with a birdlike glint of lunacy in their eyes. One gaunt man in a raincoat and scarf was talking angrily to himself, but stopped for several seconds as Nadelman approached, as if still touched by remnants of embarrassment. Nadelman felt sorriest for the ones who stared bleakly at the sea; he wished that he could conjure up a ship for them to watch, or even, small fishing boat. But the ocean, clear to the horizon, was as empty as a desert.

A waning of the light reminded him that it was time to return; the wind was cold, and he had to get back to the city. He turned and retraced his steps, the light no longer blinding now, the sun settled behind further layers of cloud and the distant hotels' ornamented roofs. Ocean and sand seemed bathed in a sad, nostalgic glow, the final scene in some half-remembered travelogue. Ahead of him the brown strip of the boardwalk receded almost to the vanishing point, then curved gently toward the water.

Something in the quality of the light released a few stray childhood memories, images from an ancient slide show. He remembered walking just this stretch of boardwalk as a boy, staring at that same almost-vanishing point. He'd been happy, he remembered; but of course, it hadn't taken much in those days: a pinwheel, a few unbroken seashells, a mass of cotton candy on a white paper cone, the anticipation of a Cracker Jack prize. Today the world was changed, or rather, it was he who had changed; he felt as if everything he gazed upon—

the boardwalk, sea, and sand—were doomed to pass away with the dying light, and that the passing would be bitter.

It occurred to him at that moment there was a third and more likely explanation for the crabbed words that his boy-self had written in the notebook—one that explained, as well, the source of Huntoon's knowledge. It was, quite simply, that he hadn't invented the god after all, hadn't created Him in giving Him a name; imagination had had nothing to do with it. The being that he feared, this force, this plague, *really existed*, and had existed long before he'd ever become aware of it. He'd had only the briefest glimpse of it; that bee-sting on the hand had been only a warning. And in recording those two words in his notebook, he had set down its identity as faithfully as any good reporter.

Hadn't there, in fact, been one particular moment of vision, when the glimpse had come? He was sure that there was; it lay just off the edge of his memory—a day long ago, in the faintly lurid world of his childhood, when the god had made His presence known.

The more seriously Nadelman considered the possibility—with each new step westward, back toward the place from which he'd started—the more certain he became. And with the certainty came memories, long-buried snapshots floating lazily to the surface of a pool, soggy but still recognizable after years of lying hidden in the depths.

He remembered—it *felt* like a memory—a certain morning; a haze across the sun; pussy willows in a patch of woods. Spring. He'd been on his way to school, well pleased with the world, a Scout knife in his pocket, or a magazine to sneak into class, or maybe his brand-new leather notebook; school in those days had not yet grown oppressive. He remembered the warmth of the sunlight, the smell of the buds on the trees, like tiny green sprigs of broccoli, the slap of his shoes on the sidewalk, the sound of birds, the unnerving buzz of bees . . .

How strange to think it could have happened then, for morning had represented safety to him in those days, ever since his earliest childhood. Often waking long before dawn, he would greet the morning with a smile of relief, free at last to lie back and let his guard down, the terrors of the night got through once more, the world returned again to visibility, the noise of traffic, the comforting presence of people on the street, whistlers on the sidewalk, human footsteps, voices. Everything would be all right if only he could hold out till morning.

But this one morning had been different. Something had intruded on the day—a darkness suddenly filling the sky, like the dark before a storm, only much worse: for in this darkness lurked the suggestion

of a face . . . .

Wait. Was that a real memory, or merely the memory of a dream he'd once had? It was maddeningly hard to be sure.

Or had the vision perhaps come at home? For now another memory had surfaced, of lying alone and ill in bed one afternoon in his old room, where pastel animals smiled from the wallpaper and, through the window by his head, the shingles of a neighboring roof curled brown and familiar through the maples.

Yes, he remembered now. He had lain there staring dazedly at the ceiling, listening to a distant airplane recede in wave upon wave of sound—and suddenly he had heard in it a note of horror, the whisper of a monstrous voice that spoke and sang and threatened.

Unless, of course, that, too, had been a dream. Or a boy's half-delirious fantasy.

But dream or daydream, what was it he had heard at that moment? What secret had he stumbled upon, back there in the hazy light of his childhood, that he'd recorded so cryptically—yet so correctly—in his notebook?

He no longer knew. All mysteries paled beside that of his own vanished past. He walked on, the boardwalk wide and empty before him, but he felt as if he'd come to a dead end. The trail had simply disappeared, like words on a blackboard wiped clean with a swipe of the eraser; like the long-demolished houses on his old block.

And then a gull cried sharply, hungrily, above him, and he remembered.

He hadn't been in bed or on his way to school. It had happened here, on this very stretch of beach, at the height of the summer, with the ocean filled with bathers and the cloudless sky an eggshell blue.

Something had inexplicably felt wrong; a terror had come over his young heart as he walked along the sand. A sudden insight. A vision. For a moment the view overhead had flickered, as from a loose connection—a momentary darkening of the sun—and he'd thought he glimpsed a face that leered across the sky, too wide for him to take it all in: a vast inhuman shape that grinned and mocked, like a figure gazing down into a fishbowl . . . .

But might not this, too, be mere fantasy—some infantile memory of a face peering into his crib, but blurred now, dimmed, distorted by the intervening decades until, gigantic and malevolent, it filled the sky?

The boardwalk on which he was retracing his steps appeared to reach to the horizon. He tore his gaze from the vanishing point in the distance, where all lines converged in the furnace of the sun, to stare at the beach beyond the boardwalk's iron railings. And as he



did so, the memory leaped into focus.

Something, he remembered, had happened to him there, down on the sand; something had tripped him—a bump, a stone, a piece of driftwood, an uprearing in the earth . . .

No, that wasn't it; he remembered now. Just as the sky darkened, beneath the glare of eyes as big as galaxies, he had felt his foot slide, then sink into a hollow in the sand. And the sand had opened beneath him, then pressed in upon him, clutched him, dried to draw him in. As if the earth were yearning to crush him, smother him, blot out the very memory of him. As if the planet, all nature, all creation, the very fabric of reality, were inimical to breeds such as his.

And hadn't it all happened on this very stretch of beach? Wasn't this the very spot where, on that long-forgotten day, he'd first had an inkling of the truth?

All gods yielded before the implacable urgings of habit. Monday saw him back at the office, his schedule unchanged, dutifully laboring on the Holiday Farm account. He put in a full day on it, skipping his session at the gym and working right through lunch, his only departure from routine. It was as if, by sheer industriousness, he could shore up the props of his life that had begun to slip away. Even he was aware of it, at odd points in the day: pinning a selection of cherry-tree sketches to the cork board by his desk, he saw himself, for a moment, as a man frantically papering over the holes in his home, layer upon layer, while around him walls crumbled and fell.

Those same walls trembled and nearly collapsed when, leaving work meticulously at five-thirty, pleased with the thought that, on the way home, he would complete some early Christmas shopping before the stores closed, he rode down in the elevator crowded with lower-ranking members of the office staff and heard the new receptionist complain to one of the secretaries about the crank calls she'd been getting all afternoon. "And when I'd say hello, no one would answer. I don't know who they thought they were trying to annoy."

He felt more guilty than angry, like the father of a psychopath, a father who had failed to warn the world. He knew that the calls were meant for him, that Huntoon leered repulsively behind them, and that they'd somehow been provoked by his previous day's excursion. *I never should have bothered going out there*, he told himself. *I'll have that creep pursuing me till the grave.*

At work the next day Nadelman hurried past the receptionist, avoiding his usual small-talk. He felt sure that, face to face with her, he'd betray his guilty secret, and at the end of the day he refrained from asking her the question foremost in his mind: whether she'd

received any more mysterious calls.

His question, nonetheless, was answered soon enough, for at dinner that evening another such call to Nadelman's home. It was picked up in the kitchen by Michael, for whom answering the phone was still more an adventure than a chore.

"Hello?" The boy's voice, as always, was eager, as if a present awaited him at the other end of the line. Nadelman watched his son's expression nervously, waiting for the next response. The boy pressed the phone to his ear, then frowned, confused. "Hello?"

Nadelman was out of his chair and across the room in an instant, taking the phone from Michael's hands. "Hello!" he said sharply. The phone might as well have been dead. "Listen, Huntoon!" he yelled, aware that his wife and son were listening, "now you're really getting me angry! I wish you and your mother would just get the hell out of my life! I swear to God, you should be locked up!"

He slammed the phone back into its cradle; then, thinking better of it, he lifted it again and switched off the ringer. "Now at least we'll get some peace and quite around here."

And they did. Once more the world was kept at bay—until Thursday of the same week, when Nadelman's secretary buzzed him as he sat writing in his office, a DO NOT DISTURB sign on his door, to tell him that a man was waiting to see him in the reception area.

"I don't see any appointments written down," he said crossly, already thinking of Huntoon and wishing there were a back way so he could sneak out.

"He doesn't have an appointment," said the secretary. Then, puzzled, relaying the message third-hand: "He says he doesn't need one. It's someone named Sergeant Berkey."

Could this be a joke? The only Berkey that Nadelman knew was an account executive at Kone, Ruderman, who'd been in charge of the Life-Saver campaign.

"Find out what he wants."

There was a pause. "Denise says he's a police officer."

Nadelman felt his insides knot. Bodies in the morgue, grainy photos in the *Post*—he could already picture them: Rhoda, Michael, smiling the inane, pathetic smile of the world's front-page victims. He swallowed, wondering which one it would be.

"Send him in."

He went to his office door and opened it, then sat down again to wait, already seeing himself as the father, the husband—the one who is told the terrible news. Sharon was returning, leading a middle-aged man in a blue patrolman's uniform. Nadelman's heart beat faster.

She ushered the man into the office and closed the door behind

him. Once he saw the man's distracted smile, Nadelman knew he had nothing to fear. The other stood with cop's hat in hand, gazing out the window past Nadelman's head.

"Nice view," he said with just a touch of envy, sinking heavily into one of the low leather chairs facing the desk. He studied Nadelman's face. "I'm Sergeant Berkey. We tracked you down here from the address on your stationery."

Stationery? How had the police seen his stationery? But the officer was peering at a black leatherette notepad. "The reason I'm here, Mr. Nadelman, is that we've found the bodies of two friends of yours—" He flipped a page. "A Mr. Arlen Huntoon and a Mrs. Lonee Huntoon."

"My God!"

So the *Post* had claimed someone after all. Relief flooded through him—relief that, if someone had to die, it had been those two—followed immediately by guilt. The poor old woman!

"When?" he asked. "How?" Hadn't the mother said something about an ex-boss of Arlen's, someone he'd quarreled with? Or had those downstairs neighbors finally come back for revenge? The Huntoons had seemed to have a lot of enemies.

Berkey shook his head. "That's not for me to say, Mr. Nadelman. But I'll tell you this much, the guys out in Long Beach came across the two of 'em by accident, in the course of an entirely separate investigation—or at least they thought it was."

"What sort of investigation?"

The other looked down for a moment, tracing his finger around the sweatband of his hat. "I'm not really at liberty to say. The God's honest truth is, I'm here to see if you could answer a few questions."

"Of course." Nadelman waited, expecting the man to whip out a laminated card and read him his rights, but instead the other merely withdrew a ball-point pen from his shirt pocket and opened the pad to a fresh page.

"Did you know the deceased?"

"Only slightly." Keeping his voice low, lest his secretary hear, Nadelman recounted some of the events that had led to his visit there this past weekend. There was no sense lying about it, hell, if the police already had possession of his letters, they certainly must know the main facts of the story.

"So why exactly was it you went out there?" Berkey sat forward, pen poised.

Nadelman shrugged. "Because I felt I was getting harassed by this guy—" Whoops, that sounded too hostile! "I mean I felt he was a nuisance for my family and me—" He saw the lawman laboriously

writing down "nuisance," and felt better. "And since he didn't seem to own a phone, I figured I'd have to go out there and talk to him. Believe me, it was the one and only time I ever met him."

The officer finished writing—were these guys really dumb, he wondered, or did they just play dumb, like Colombo?—and slipped the pen back in his pocket.

"Don't worry, Mr. Nadelman, you're not on the suspect list. We got a description of the guy, and it's nothing like you. A big galoot, I hear. I'm just checking up on a few facts." He flashed a smile; he had probably had a course or two in human relations. "We gotta do our job, you know? It's what all of us pay taxes for."

Nadelman tried to remember his final goodbye to the Huntoons, his march downstairs, hurrying outside to breathe the good air. He had left them both alive and smiling, unprotected. Had the murderer been watching, even then? Waiting, perhaps, for him to leave?

"As I mentioned," he said, "the last time I spoke to Huntoon was Tuesday night—even though he didn't speak back. And when were the bodies discovered?"

Berkey scratched his thinning hair. "Wednesday morning, I think."

"So they couldn't have been dead for very long."

"I guess not. Lucky thing the cops out there were in the building, otherwise it could've been weeks. I get the impression those two didn't have many friends."

Nadelman nodded. "I got the same impression myself."

He hadn't been a friend of theirs either—*friends with those creeps? you've got to be kidding*—but for the rest of the day, after Berkey had fortified himself with one more envious glance out the office window and had departed, Nadelman felt as if he had lost two old and well-loved comrades: a little eccentric, perhaps, but valued nonetheless. He was downcast.

At least he was until he got home that night and discovered Huntoon's final message.

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Rhoda had taken Michael to a classmate's eighth birthday party and had left Nadelman some ham and cheese in the refrigerator for his dinner. The day's mail lay in a pile on the kitchen table, a scrap of paper atop it with the message, in Rhoda's jubilant handwriting: *Another one from Guess Who?* Nadelman immediately recognized the address label and its tiny red lobster.

Except in cases of extreme curiosity, such as he'd experienced that

previous Sunday in the Long Beach luncheonette, Nadelman, as a rule, did not read the *Post* or the *Daily News* except over people's shoulders on the subway. Their stories seemed too transient to waste time on; even his reading of the *Times* was, on weekdays, usually confined to the front page (if there were no gigantic headlines, the world was safe for another twenty four hours), the opinion pages, and the business section for news about the advertising world. And so it wasn't surprising that, until he tore open Huntoon's final envelope, he hadn't seen the item it contained, a clipping cut from Tuesday's *Post* that Huntoon must have mailed the very day he'd been murdered.

L.I. DUMP GRAVE FOR SLAIN COUPLE. A posed photo showed a workman in overalls, his face shadowed by the hardhat he wore, pointing to an equally shadowy depression in the mound of rubbish he was standing upon. "The bodies of an unidentified man and woman were discovered Monday morning by landfill engineers working at the county dump in Oceanside, Long Island," the article said. It noted that the bodies had been described by police as those of "an elderly white couple, apparently in their seventies," and that workmen had also found, lying beside them, "a large dog, probably a terrier."

It was the mention of the dog that did it. Nadelman, sickened, saw how naive he'd been. He remembered the smell from Huntoon's closet, and realized that what Huntoon had left out at the dump that morning had not been the creature at all.

It was them, it had to be. The old couple from downstairs.

He knew now why the police had paid a visit to the Huntoons' apartment yesterday. They'd obviously had time to identify the dead as Mr. and Mrs. Braverman.

Judging by the state of decomposition, the article said, the pair had not been buried long; the deaths were believed to have occurred over the weekend. The bodies had been, in one detective's phrase—which the *Post* repeated as the article's subhead—"slashed to ribbons."

Nadelman remembered the broken glass on Huntoon's roof, and shuddered.

Written at the top, in Huntoon's heavy hand—the crazy, boastful creep!—was, "Don't worry I'd never let it hurt YOU."

Standing beneath a Second Avenue streetlight, his shoulders hunched against the evening's chill, Nadelman peered hurriedly through the *News* and the *Post* he'd just bought. He felt like a fugitive, furtively scanning the pages for an affirmation of his crime.

The report in the *News* was restrained, almost disappointingly so.

### HUNT FOR MURDER CLUES YIELDS TWO MORE DEATHS

*Nassau County police, attempting to identify the elderly man and woman whose bodies were discovered Monday in a dump outside Oceanside, L.I., yesterday stumbled upon two more bodies in the course of the investigation, police spokesmen said. The first victims have been identified as Leo Braverman, 76, and his wife Flora, 73, of Locust Court in Long Beach. The two most recent victims were Lonnee Huntoon, in her late 70s, and her son Arlen, 33, fellow tenants in the same apartment building.*

The *Post* put it more flamboyantly—SOUTH SHORE SLASHER CLAIMS VICTIMS 4 & 5—and it included a photograph of the Bravermans, both of them small, plump, and white-haired, taken on what looked like a Miami Beach vacation. The woman was smiling, though her smile hadn't saved her; the man appeared more grave, as if he'd known where the photo would someday appear. "The bodies of the Long Beach couple, along with their pet dog, were found Monday morning by workers in the Oceanside town dump," the article said.

Nadelman was puzzled by the headline—how had the body count reached five?—until his eye fell on a later paragraph identifying the first victim as "Esteban Farella, 46, chief dispatcher at the Val-U-Rite Delivery Service in Valley Stream, whose headless body was found last week."

Nadelman stiffened, remembering the story he'd read Sunday. He had failed to make the connection, but obviously the authorities had not—though they were clearly on the wrong track. "Police are still investigating a suspected gangland motive," the paper said.

Despite the headline, slasher victims three and four were not pictured, but the story described Huntoon as "a former Val-U-Rite employee laid off last August."

Nadelman did no more than skim the rest, if only for self-protection—"the widowed mother . . . mangled remains . . . work of one man . . . reports of a figure seen leaving the building that night . . ."—but he froze when he came to the story's final line: "Police said the bodies were discovered locked in the younger Huntoon's closet."

He closed the paper with trembling hands. His fingertips felt dirty. What was it Huntoon had said that day on the roof? Something about the servant preferring to take orders from Nadelman himself?

Yes, that's what he'd said. Nadelman remembered well enough.

But he didn't remember precisely what he himself had yelled into the phone two nights ago, at what he'd thought was Huntoon—and was just as happy he did not.

The idea that anyone could be afraid of a dachshund was ridiculous, especially one as small as Nadelman's. She was called Brownie—the name, of course, had been given to her by Michael, who as yet had no stake in being clever—and she was a good-humored, comical little creature, trotting briskly up the sidewalk with the complacent smile of a young PTA mother. So it seemed extremely odd to Nadelman that one night during the week of Thanksgiving, as he walked the dog along Seventy-sixth Street, a clear plastic Baggie in hand, he saw two male pedestrians coming his way stop, squint at him, and scatter. One of them crossed to the other side of the street; the other turned and hurried back the way he'd come.

Puzzled, Nadelman wondered if they had been terrified of Brownie . . . or of him. Fancy, grown men so scared of a dachshund! Suddenly a third alternative dawned on him; but when he turned and scanned the sidewalk behind him, there was no one there.

On Wednesday afternoon of that same week—really the mere stump of a week, with only three days of work to endure—Rhoda took the car and drove up to Westchester with Michael and the dog. They would spend the night with her parents; Nadelman would join them on Thanksgiving Day. He'd claimed he had a Thursday morning meeting with an important soft-drink client who'd be flying into New York for the long weekend and had insisted on squeezing in some business obligations. In truth, he knew that Cele would be available—uniquely so: because she was a foreigner the holiday meant little to her; she would simply be having dinner at a friend's.

"Some people have such a nerve!" said Rhoda, helping Michael pack on Wednesday morning.

"It'll only be an hour or so," said Nadelman. "Just one of those stuffy breakfast meetings at the Carlyle, with the sixteen-dollar scrambled eggs. I'll take the train up afterward, and you can pick me up at the station."

"Just leave room for the turkey," said Rhoda.

"And just you be sure to call me tonight before bedtime," he said, kissing her fondly on the cheek as he left for work.

He lingered at home that night until ten-thirty, when her call came. After chatting with her about the train schedule, he hung up and, leaving the phone off the hook, took a taxi down to Cele's.

Their night together was not all that Nadelman had hoped. Maybe

it was nerves, or simple guilt, as if the unhooked phone back in his apartment were still sounding warning beeps in his ear.

He felt even more disturbed the next morning when, as Cele unlatched the front door and prepared to kiss him goodbye, she suddenly wrinkled up her delicate Slavic nose.

"Ugh, the people in this building, they are so disgusting!"

She pointed to a small irregular puddle in the hall just in front of her door. Nadelman, gingerly stepping over it with his overnight bag in hand, intent on getting to Grand Central in time, smelled a sour, fishy smell and thought for a moment of the house in Locust Court. But that was an idea he immediately cast back into the pile. In truth, Cele's building *was* a bit shabby.

It was only when he was on the train to New Rochelle and had laid aside his *Advertising Age* and *Fortune* to watch the fleeting scenery that, as if suddenly touched by a trickle of ice water, he was struck by a vision of what might have left the puddle—something, he suspected, that had waited patiently by their door all night. But here on the train, with well-groomed suburban lanes rolling by beyond the window and the smell of the snack bar to whet his hunger, such visions were hard to believe in.

Still, he was glad that his own building had a doorman.

One thing, at least, was certain, or so he told himself from time to time over the next few weeks: justice had been done. The creep had reaped exactly what he'd sown. His poem had hit it on the nose:

*A god who smirks and says, "The joke's on you!"*

And the joke had been on Huntoon.

One later incident, at least, was almost certainly a product of Nadelman's imagination—though it was somewhat unnerving at the time. Alone in the kitchen one weekend afternoon in December, while Rhoda was in the bedroom getting ready to go to the supermarket, Nadelman peered into the refrigerator and yelled, "I need more roast coffee!"—at which point, as if on command, the brown paper trash bag in the corner obligingly collapsed in on itself and tipped over, spilling its contents, including a flood of old coffee grounds, onto the kitchen floor.

He did not enter the kitchen again until the following week.

He began to mutter at odd times about "the servant problem." One day his secretary discovered a memo pad in his office on which he'd



written half-distractedly: "There's a masked figure looking up at my apartment. I know that when I go out there, it'll be gone. What scares me is, what happens the day I go down . . . and it's *not* gone?"

His final scare came one night just before Christmas, while his arms were laden with last-minute presents.

Most of his friends complained about the holidays—the pressures, the commercialism, the materialism—but Nadelman had always enjoyed them; they were one of the few times he was truly happy being a family man. He wasn't a Christian, but he celebrated Christmas of a sort. As he saw it, material goods gave the holiday its meaning, just as they did in days of old when pagans stuffed their larders with good food and drink. It was the season for shopping, something Nadelman enjoyed, just as he enjoyed, as professional, the corny seasonal ads—Santa with the perennial Coke in hand, elves telephoning one another long distance to stay in touch.

Walking north on Third Avenue just a block from his home, he headed toward the only place still open on the block, a small neighborhood liquor store where he intended to buy some cognac, or even better, some Armagnac. As he passed the window of a toy shop, he paused out of habit to study it, even though the hour was late and the shop was closed. Suddenly, as if in warning the shop lights dimmed—and as they did so, he noticed a figure reflected in the window, ghostly in the dim light and intersected with the images of toys, games, and stuffed animals. For one crazy moment he took the reflection for his own, wildly distorted, or that of a fellow shopper wearing a paper bag over his head. Then something gleamed below the apparition's wrist, something small and jagged, and he recognized what stood behind him.

Those in extreme situations are often known to drop what they're holding and run, but few have just paid two hundred and forty-five dollars for a salmon-colored cashmere sweater and a hundred and ten dollars for games and a new joystick for a son's Atari. Holding tight to his gifts, Nadelman took off down the block, legs flying. He didn't care that he almost bumped into the backs of a couple walking ahead of him, nor did he care what they probably thought of him for shouting, "Leave the hell alone!" as he ran. He was far more concerned with whether his servant could hear him, and whether it was still inclined to honor his commands.

Approaching the liquor store, Nadelman slowed down, preparing to dash inside, but increased his speed again when he heard a sound behind him that might have been the echoing tinkle of Christmas chimes, but which sounded far more like the breaking of glass. He

ran on, footsteps pounding the sidewalk, sensing above him a vast face that leered down from the cold sky. Ahead, on the corner, loomed the stony grey mass of a synagogue, looking as solemn and solid as a fortress. The ancient wooden front door, through which a group of dark-coated worshippers had just passed, was slowly swinging shut. Putting on a burst of speed, he hurried up the wide stone steps and slipped inside.

The synagogue was Orthodox; he'd never set foot in one before. A large gold menorah stood on a platform at the front, five candles lit. A skeptical-looking attendant handed him a *yarmulke* as he came in. Slapping it onto his head, he sat down in one of the rear pews, brightly colored presents in his lap with pictures of Santa Claus and reindeer, as he gazed, still panting, at the high stone walls, the tapestries, the candles, the grave-looking figures depicted in the windows. And hours later, when the attendant came to tell him it was time to leave, he politely but firmly refused. He was willing to explain it once, he would explain it a dozen times if necessary, and always with infinite patience; he would not be moved, and he would not look back, and he didn't intend to go outside until the night was over. Everything would be all right if only he could make it through till morning.

# JOHN METCALFE

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## The Feasting Dead

*Never a prolific writer, John Metcalfe (1891-1965) was one of Britain's stalwart legion of writers of the macabre. Much of his life he spent in poverty living for a number of years in the United States as a barge captain on New York's East River. Like Oliver Onions his work is polished and unyielding, frequently enigmatic and always memorable. It took me a while to appreciate Metcalfe's work as he is not at his best in the short story and my first encounter with 'The Smoking Leg', the title story of his first collection published in 1925, was not one of revelrous discovery. His best short stories are undoubtedly 'The Double Admiral' and 'The Bad Lands' and I urge you to seek them out. Metcalfe is at his very best, though, with some room in which to create his atmosphere of mystery and the grotesque, as in 'The Feasting Dead'. This was originally written for a volume of Metcalfe's best new stories, but no British publisher would accept it on account of its being too gruesome. In the end the American writer and publisher, and staunch friend of neglected British writers, August Derleth issued The Feasting Dead as a separate book in 1954 from his Arkham House imprint. Always sorely neglected, Metcalfe is yet another example of how publishers never appreciate the talent on their own doorstep.*

## 1

Our boy, Denis, had at no time been very strong, and when his mother, whom he had adored, died suddenly, I fetched him from his boarding school by Edinburgh and let him stop for a while at home.

Poor little fellow! I had tended previously perhaps to be a trifle stern with him, but we needed each other now, and I did all I could to make up to him for anything of harshness in the past and soften, for his tender sensibilities, the blow I myself felt so sorely.

No doubt, I had become a thoroughly "indulgent" father and would not, I think, have rued it but for that train of circumstances to be narrated. We were living, then, in the big pleasant old place "Ashtoft", near Winchester, which I had bought on my retirement from the army, and when Denis asked still to stay from school for one more term and 'keep me company' I was secretly flattered I expect as well as comforted. The milder southern air, and his daily rides over the downs, would do him good and he would take no harm from missing a few months of Greek and Algebra.

There was, that May and June, a French family—or rather, a father with his young son and daughter—spending part of the summer in the neighbourhood, and that Denis should like them and they him I found altogether fortunate. Cécile, my wife, had been half French, and when it transpired that our new acquaintances were not only residents of her native province but must actually (as we compared notes and worked it out together) be some sort of distant cousins, this chance encountering seemed more than ordinarily felicitous. Cécile had never tired of talking to Denis of Auvergne—its history, scenery, and above all its legends, some of them she admitted rather shocking—and we had frequently regretted that, as yet, he had not seen it for himself. He could however, read and speak French very tolerably—putting me to a total shame—and now, in a variety of loyalty, I fancy, to his mother's memory, was doubly prejudiced in favour of anything or anyone of Gallic origin.

As for these Vaignons, the father, who cultivated us with considerable assiduity, was, I believed, a landowner of consequence, with a château not far from Issoire. He was a lean, somewhat nervous yet taciturn man, with sunken cheeks and an unhappy brooding manner which I set down to his recent bereavement. The fact that he, too, had lost his wife last year was an added, if unspoken, reason for sympathy amongst us, and I was wholly glad that Denis had the orphaned Augustine and Marcel for his playmates. Truth compels me to confess that they weren't very prepossessing little scamps—being

undernourished-looking, swarthy, narrow-eyed and quarrelsome!—but for Denis their society evidently had charm.

“This shall be *au revoir* and not good-bye, M. le Colonel,” said M. Vaignon upon leaving. “For Denis, at the least. Denis shall come to see me in Auvergne, if you can spare him, in his holidays, while, to be quits, my own Marcel and Augustine might visit you.”

Here was a new idea! But, when I questioned him, Denis, it seemed, knew all about it.

“And would you care to go?” I asked, surprised.

“Oh, yes . . . I may, mayn’t I?”

“We’ll see . . . Yes, I daresay,” I temporised. “Wait and we’ll see.”

The notion had been rather sprung upon me, yet such holiday exchanges were constantly advertised in the Press, and in the present instance there was an already-existing acquaintance between the families, to say nothing of a degree, if slender, of relationship. As for “holidays”—Denis had had plenty of *them*, lately, but he *would* be off to school again, nearer home, before so long. He had been falling behind, inevitably, in his studies, and now, I thought, he had a golden opportunity of picking up his French.

Next August I went over with him to Foant, saw him installed in M. Vaignon’s château, where I stopped one night, and returned placidly enough to Hampshire with Marcel and Augustine the following day.

This arrangement remained in force for well over a year till Denis was thirteen, through several successive holidays, or parts of them. My boy’s persistence and perseverance with the business, I must say, somewhat astonished me. What kind of fun could he have there, I wondered, that so attracted him? Marcel and Augustine, when they came to me as they usually did, could largely amuse each other, but Denis had no one of his own age to play with. Cécile had had a young nephew, Willi, her brother’s child, but he had died two years ago, or else, I thought regretfully, my Denis might have looked *him* up and found him, possibly, congenial company. Now, even Willi’s parents, who had lived within easy drive of the château, had moved to Dijon, and Denis was reduced, as I have said, to M. Vaignon for the supply of entertainment. I was perplexed and, maybe, a shade jealous.

Thus far, I had had but that one glimpse of the château, since it was either M. Vaignon or his major domo Flébard who, on the next few occasions, took the children to and fro; and now, still wondering, I tried to recall the place more clearly.

The château was old, and generally in somewhat poor repair, though its interior was pleasing. Its exterior, and the immediate approaches,

had been dusk-shrouded when we arrived, but before that I had had to hire a taxi, at an exorbitant fare, from the nearest station, a dozen miles away, and had had some chance of viewing the countryside between. It was austere, and grimly forbidding, with a burnt-out, cindery quality I found depressing. However, that didn't matter particularly, and our effusive welcome from M. Vaignon, coupled with repeated apologies for the breakdown of the car that should have met us, had reassured me, if I needed it. After Denis was in bed, my host and I had chatted till midnight, over some superlative brandy. There had been, from him, some laughing allusion to a "haunted" turret room, but the story attached to it seemed confused and I could not subsequently recollect it.

"Do you still want to go to Foant *every* holiday?" I had asked Denis once. "Why don't you give a trial to Uncle Michel and Aunt Bette instead? They'd love to have you there with them, at Dijon."

"Oh *no* . . . I like it so at Foant, yes I *do* . . ." A quick anxiety in his tone surprised me.

Till then, I had acquiesced in the arrangement somewhat lukewarmly, though certainly without misgiving; and even now it would be an exaggeration to say I was at all uneasy. Simply, I felt that, from such slight and casual beginnings, the thing had somehow become too important or endured too long.

"But surely, you must be terribly dull there sometimes. What do you do with yourself all day?"

"Oh . . . there's a lot to do. We—" He faltered, embarrassedly, and I experienced a faint, disquiet qualm. His delicacy had always caused his mother and myself concern, and at her death I had feared seriously the effect upon his health. But he had borne his share of grief for her manfully enough and, for a while, had seemed to benefit from exercise and a respite from lessons. At the moment, however, he was nervously flushed—maybe dreading my vetoing his further visits—and his eyes had an odd strained look, as if, the idea curiously struck me, he were carrying some sort of burden.

No more was said, at that time, on the subject, and the appearance, the next week, of escort Flébard—a decent, sober fellow who seemed propriety incarnate—temporarily allayed my doubts.

Yet after Denis was gone they naggingly revived. What *was* it, at the château, I could not stop wondering, that held this strong continuing attraction for my boy? Without, exactly, scenting anything amiss, I recognised that here was an affair or situation which I had been to blame in not exploring thoroughly, and which, at least, would bear more careful scrutiny.

I resolved that, on Denis's next trip, if there should be one, I would

again accompany him, or perhaps bring him back, myself, and possibly, in either case, remain with him at Foant for a day or so before returning.

That visit I remember very well. I remember, at its close, concluding that no, there was really nothing after all to worry about, and then, as a wave of unaccountable depression over-came me, feeling as vaguely puzzled and undecided in my mind as ever.

M. Vaignon, pressing me to stop longer than the three days I did, had been almost too attentive a host, scarcely indeed permitting me out of his sight. With his own children (of whom, next year he would see less, one being entered for a lycée at Bourges, the other for a convent school in the same town) he seemed stricter than in Hampshire, and I reflected wryly that, while it lasted, this exchange-system certainly gave him the better of the bargain, for there could be no comparison between my handsome, graceful Denis and his two "replacements"—queer, cryptic little monkeys that they were.

For my sojourn at the château it had turned out more convenient to choose not the beginning but the end of a stay there, by Denis, of four weeks. The hours passed, not disagreeably and till my final night quite unremarkably, in talking, eating, card-playing, sheer loafing, and a short series of amiably conducted tours of the estate. Upon these rambles Denis would go with us, not ill-pleased to assist M. Vaignon in the part of showman, and yet, I thought, a trifle distraught and subdued, his bright head glinting on before us in the sun. It was extremely sultry, the middle of August, and the scorched country frowned quivering around us through a heathaze. Towards Foant, the turmoiled landscape was a gross tumble of smirched rocks, like something caught in the act of an explosion or—a more fanciful comparison occurred to me—as if these riven slabs, seared spires and pinnacles and blackened ingots of fused earth had been the "men" which sportive devils had hurled down upon the gaming-table of the puits in some infernal tourney, and then left in disarray. I told myself I would be very thankful when my boy and I were home.

But what had chiefly struck me during my three days at the château was a peculiar faint change—for all his courtesy—in M. Vaignon. Once, when I referred casually to Denis's next visit, a strange hesitating and constrained look crossed his face.

"Yes," he replied, without conviction. "Ah well, we all grow up, and the best of things come to an end . . ."

That night—the eve of our return to England—I was restless. My feather-bed stifled me, and I remembered that a winding stair outside my room, adjoining Denis's, led to a small garden. To snatch

a breath of fresher air I began, in my dressing-gown, to descend the stairway, but stopped short at the sound of voices.

It was M. Vaignon, talking, I rather guessed, to Flébard.

"No, no," the disturbed half-whisper reached me. "We can't . . . I tell you *hélas*, it has *come again* . . ."

Hastily but softly I retreated. M. Vaignon's last words had been spoken with a curious emphasis—of fear or of a kind of despairing disgust—and for an instant I regretted not having waited for a sentence or two more. Undecidedly I regained the landing, and saw a crack of light under Denis's door. I gently opened it, and entered.

"Hello," I said, "so you can't get to sleep either."

"No . . . It's so hot . . ."

He was sitting up in bed, a candle burning in a wall-sconce beside him. In some way he seemed apprehensive and excited.

"It's not as quiet as you'd suppose, out here in the country," I remarked, less from an interest in the fact than to conceal my own continuing agitation. "I thought just now I could hear those old cows moving in the barn—or it may have been the horses in the stable . . ."

"—Or the ghost," said Denis, "in the tower room."

I smiled, as I presumed he expected me to smile. "Oh, does the ghost make noises?" I inquired, preoccupiedly, and with my mind still running upon M. Vaignon.

"Yes . . ." Denis paused, smiling, too, then added, oracularly: "Rinking noises. I—I make it make them."

"*"Rinking"* noises?" I came out of my brown study, startled, somehow, both by this odd description and by a peculiar intonation in his voice.

"Like roller-skating," he exclaimed. "Ever so funny. We —"

He had checked himself abruptly; though the smile lingered on his lips. It was a smile, I had the unpleasant intuition, that saw musingly beyond what *I* could see—a smile of some superior intimacy and acquaintance, real or fancied. But I considered it wiser not, at this time, to pursue the subject. "Good night," I said presently, and went back to my room.

After all this, I had reckoned gloomily on further wakefulness, yet, actually, fell very soon asleep, arousing with my spirits lightened and refreshed. If it were nothing worse, I remember thinking, than some absurd superstition that was afflicting M. Vaignon, then most of my anxiety was groundless. Merely, I was now tired of the business. Just one more visit, possibly, and then this holiday-exchange arrangement must begin to die a natural death.

However, as we were leaving, I had a mild resurgence of my previous qualms. M. Vaignon's looks were wan and the hand that



shook mine trembled. Suddenly, a word to characterise his altered manner—the word I had been seeking, unsuccessfully three days—flashed disconcertingly into my brain. “Guilty.” But how preposterous . . . ! What had he to feel *guilty* over? And yet . . . A shadow seemed to darken round me and round Denis too as we entered the car and waved our farewells through its windows.

But in the train and on the boat I managed temporarily to re-dismiss my bothersome forebodings. Perhaps M. Vaignon had privately decided that he had seen enough of us, had resolved gradually to drop us, and yet found it hard frankly to tell us so. Well, *I* had felt for my part that the Vaignons latterly were bulking too oppressively and largely on our own Habgood horizon, and if the break did come eventually from their side rather than from mine, so much the better and the easier for me! I was in cheerful mood as we returned to “Ashtoft”.

Two days had passed when the postman delivered to me a registered envelope, postmarked Foant. The enclosed letter from M. Vaignon read:

“DEAR COLONEL HABGOOD,

*It is with infinite distress that I am driven to inform you that it has become advisable for the hitherto so pleasant intimacy between our families to cease; nor can I, I am afraid, give any explanation of this deplorable necessity that could satisfy you. I am the victim, it appears, of a fantastic persecution or visitation with which it would not be fair that you should any longer be remotely and even unknowingly associated. This is the most that I am able to tell you in condonation of a gesture that must seem so brutal; but, in effect, I have to draw a cordon sanitaire around myself—not for my own protection but for that of those outside it! I can only hope, with my most extreme regrets that one whom I esteem so highly may accept this fact as it unfortunately stands, and grant me, henceforwards, the privilege of silence.*

*Yours,*

“V. DE LA F. VAIGNON.”

I replaced this amazing missive in its envelope. A little while ago I had been meditating just such a development—but not in this style, no indeed! Was the man mad? Oddly, my predominant emotion was not of hurt, or any anger with him. It was, rather, of bewildered consternation, and even a sort of fear, as if, instead of ending, as it seemed, the real trouble were just beginning.

Somehow, the thing hit me in the face. I did not immediately tell Denis of M. Vaignon’s letter, and for over a week I was considerably

exercised as to how I could best and most wisely do so. Finally, I let him know of it, saying that the Vaignons were going through some kind of private domestic crisis which would probably prevent his staying again at the château, for some while at least.

Admittedly, this was putting a mighty gloss on the affair, yet how else was I to phrase it? Probably, as I had surmised, M. Vaignon had been brooding this step for several months, and failed to muster courage to declare it verbally—but now its absurd written, black and white, announcement was, in all conscience, blunt to crudity (whatever its excuses, and whatever the dickens “persecution” and “visitation” might be held to mean!)-and I could hardly show Denis *that*.

He received the news quietly, though I felt it a false and deceptive quiet. It must have been a serious matter to him, and, as I see it now, he was inwardly and desperately trying to measure its gravity and to decide how far this set-back might be neutralised or remedied and still accommodated to his own desires. I was extremely sorry for him, and cast about in my mind for anything that would render the blow less wounding, and leave him a little happier.

Oddly and soon enough he himself sought to help me out of this difficulty, but in a fashion I by no means relished.

“I think it’ll be Raoul I’ll miss most,” he said as if reflectively, yet with a certain patness that did not escape me. “I told you about him, didn’t I?”

“‘Raoul’? No, you didn’t.”

“*Didn’t I?* Not Raoul Privache? Surely I—”

“No, you never spoke of him. Who is he?”

“Why, he was my greatest friend over there, in a way. I *must* have told you . . . We caught moles and bats together, and went up the puy. He’s—well, he’s a sort of odd-job man I suppose you’d call him. He gardens, and fell trees, and looks after horses, and— Oh, I know!” Denis paused, as though struck by a sudden inspiration. “He could come *here*. He could work for *you*. You need someone like that! Oh, if we had Raoul here I wouldn’t mind not going to the château . . .”

“Nonsense!” I answered brusquely. “Now, *really* . . . How many licences d’you think I’d have to get for importing an article like *that* from France?”

What made my tone momentarily bitter had not been the bizarre character of the suggestion so much as the recognition, in my own boy, of a species of duplicity. For he had never mentioned this Raoul previously, and must have known it.

While most emphatically I wanted no more Vaignon echoes, of any sort, size or description.

Denis's brows had contracted in a kind of secret defiance.

"Oh, well," he said glumly, "I expect we'll see him here anyhow . . . I expect he'll turn up, one day, just the same."

And, the devil of it was, he did. We had finished breakfast, and I was lighting my pipe in the morning room when I heard a light tap at the window. Glancing up, I saw a man outside. He was short and rather shabby, but his face I could not then properly discern. In an instant, heart-sinkingly, I realised who it must be. The fellow was gesturing, and I, in turn, found myself echoing his signals, and pointing sidewise towards the front door, which I opened for him.

He stood there, in the porch, and again, with vague non-plusment, I had the incidentally worried feeling that, somehow, I could not make out his features as plainly as I should. But at that moment there was a scamper of footsteps behind me, and Denis all but flung himself into the figure's arms. "Raoul! Raoul!" he exclaimed ecstatically. "Oh, I *knew* you'd come!"

"*Bonjour, m'sieu.*" Our visitant had put out a hand, which I mechanically shook. The hand wore a mitten leaving only the fingers exposed, and in clasping them I experienced a strange repugnance. They were cold, and lifeless as a dummy's.

But the man could speak, it soon appeared, and volubly. Denis had led him to a back room giving on to the lawn, and there the creature began to chatter, presumably in French of sorts, though too quickly for my comprehension. Denis translated sketchily. "Raoul", it seemed, was offering me his services as general handyman. He had always wanted to live in England, and to have my son for his young master would be bliss indeed. His manner, as he waited while Denis was interpreting, was an odd mixture of deference and sly assurance.

"But, good heavens!" I protested. "I can't employ him. What about his labour-permit? He can't just plant himself on us like this and—"

The man sat there, impassive, his shadowed face averted. Denis was talking with him again, conveying, I supposed, the substance of my objections.

"He's staying here, in the village anyhow," Denis announced, "though it would be nicer if he could use our loft over the old coach-house while he was looking around . . ."

"He shall *not* use our loft . . . !" I remember almost spluttering in my dumbfounded indignation.

But, in the end, he did.

Whether a greater, and a prompter, firmness on my part would have prevented or, later on, ejected him I do not know. I believe now that

it would not, and, in a sense, that what was had to be.

Since Cécile's death I had denied the child nothing, and if such "pampering" were weakness it had at least been, hitherto, a natural and perhaps pardonable weakness. But my acceptance, or toleration, of this creature, this object, this ambiguous knot-in-a-board, with whom Denis's infatuation seemed quite in-explicable, was a capitulation to my boy's half tearful and half sullen importunities surpassing any previous indulgence.

Be that as it might, "Raoul" took up his abode in the loft, and, thus confronted with the *fait accompli*, I realised gloomily that it would mean, now, a lot of unpleasantness and fuss to shift him. So, for the time being, and the time being only (as I tried to make it plain), he stayed.

There were nearly three weeks still to run of Denis's summer holidays, and he spent their waking hours, to my chagrin, almost entirely in his idol's company. I felt bewildered. Why, actually, had the man come here, and had there been a prior secret understanding between him and his admirer in the matter? Was his passport in order (though I presume it must be, for him to have arrived at all), and what would the neighbours, and my own servants, think?

However, superficially and for a while, there was less trouble than I had anticipated. The fellow, to grant him his due, was unobtrusive to the point of self-effacement and indeed appeared anxious to keep out of people's way. He insisted on some pretence of working for me and occasionally was to be seen polishing boots and harness, clearing dead wood from the shrubbery, and the like. His meals he ate, usually, apart, fetching them from the kitchen, and consuming them in his loft. How he got on with my cook, Jenny, or with my maid Clara I was at first unable to find out. Probably they decided that the curious importation represented merely one more whim of the young master's and for the present let it go at that. As for my regular groom and gardener, Dobbs, he, as it happened, was in hospital, so his reactions were not yet available.

Just the same, the position was bizarre. Denis would shortly be returning to school, and then of course there could be no excuse for Raoul's remaining. I half thought, once or twice, and despite the "silence" so mysteriously enjoined on me, of writing to "sound" M. Vaignon on the subject, but, as may be imagined, I was pretty much on my dignity in that quarter, and had, besides, no right whatever to assume that *he* was implicated or involved in any way with Raoul.

I was on edge and out of sorts, living it seemed unreal in a kind of semi-dream. More and more I became sensible of this man Raoul's presence, irking me in a manner I could not describe. And one small

item in particular still teased me. The fellow had been here, now, close on two weeks, and yet for some reason, I had never formed a clear idea of his appearance. Either his features struck me differently at different times or had a queer indefiniteness that amounted, as it were, to nullity. It was not till later that I discovered that this little difficulty of his facelessness had bothered other people too.

One day, less than a week before the end of his holidays, Denis had started a slight cold. It seemed nothing much—and hadn't stopped his going out all morning, as was now his rule, with his obnoxious playmate on the down—but was enough, in view of the nearness of his return to school, to worry me. I remembered telling him to take it easy indoors for the rest of the afternoon and then retiring myself, to my study with the intention, I also recall, of settling, finally, my future course of action in this whole exasperating "*affaire Raoul*".

But my deliberations had not got very far when they were interrupted by a visit from a Mr Walstron, a local farmer to whom I was arranging to lease a meadow. Terms having been agreed to mutual satisfaction, the old man went on to gossip amiably of other things.

"Your boy misses his mother, sure-ly. Up there on the Winacre I met him this morning, looking right poorly, and chattering away like that, all to himself . . ."

"To himself? Why he—" I faltered, confused and apprehensive.

"Well, yes . . . Talking, or it might have been singing, you know, and—funny thing—my two dogs, they—oh, you should 'a seen 'em. Such a snarling and a snapping . . . ! Never seen 'em act that way with *your* young lad before . . ."

Presently Mr Walstron wished me good day, leaving me, certainly, with plenty to think over.

It was extremely strange. Denis, I knew, had gone out, not alone but with Raoul. And then—those dogs . . . For, oddly, it had been with dogs that Raoul had achieved, as yet, his summit of unpopularity. My own setter, Trixie, could not abide him, shivering and growling quite dementedly whenever he was by, and evidently undecided whether to fly from him or at him.

I was still trying to digest the implications of Mr Walstron's story when the form of Raoul himself darkened the panes. Outwardly and otherwise well conducted, he had an annoying habit of coming round to the windows and tapping to attract attention. This time, perceiving I had already observed him, he did not tap but simply held up a hand. To my disgusted consternation I saw that the wrist and forearm were bloody.

Hurrying out, I examined his hurt. The flesh was badly lacerated.

"*Chiens*," I understood him to mutter. "*Chiens . . .*"

Here was a further complication! Dog bites can be mischievous and I would not risk attempting to treat such wounds myself. So far, I had shirked bringing the man's residence to any official or even semi-official cognisance, but now, if the doctor were called, my precious piece of contraband must be declared and I foresaw all sorts of tiresome queries as to the fellow's position under the Health Insurance Act and any amount of stupid fuss . . .

In the event, I summoned my old friend and adviser, Goderich, who had attended Cécile during her last illness. He dressed Raoul's arm and, while on the spot, looked at my boy as well. Denis's cold had got worse. He was running a temperature, and Goderich promised to come again next day.

Reports, then, on the two patients were discouraging. As for Raoul, he had had to be moved to a small attic bedroom. His wound was an ugly one, and I somehow gathered an impression that Goderich was puzzled by the case.

Denis, it seemed probable, would not be fit to return punctually to school and for a time I half suspected him of shamming in order to postpone the parting with his friend. He, Denis, had been told of Raoul's misadventure and pleaded, vainly, to be allowed to see him. The pair were upon different floors, and in different wings, the farther from each other, I had thought, the better.

Raoul's accident (and he could or would not state which dog or dogs it was that had attacked him) had been upon a Thursday, and by the Sunday his arm still showed no improvement. The following morning, Goderich rather surprised me by asking me to "see of myself", and I watched him unwrap the bandages. I caught, I fancied, an expression of something approaching astonishment on his face when the torn flesh was bared. The entire limb below the elbow was swollen and had a repulsive livid hue. Goderich motioned me to go. "I'll see you afterwards," he murmured.

"Well," he said, rejoining me downstairs. "I'll confess I'm a bit foxed. The latest wonder-drug's proved a flop and—it's—it's quite extraordinary, but the whole forearm seems—"

"Yes, what?" I pressed impatiently.

"Why, to have mortified. But it—it *couldn't* have, to that extent, without other associated symptoms, gross symptoms, which just aren't there. Yet—well—pah . . . ! Well, the damn thing almost stinks . . . !"

I stared at him, and he went on. "I'm speaking unprofessionally, Habgood, and not merely being nose-y. Precisely how you came by this odd customer I'm not inquiring, but—"

Our talk was interrupted by a scurrying commotion in the passage. The door burst open and Clara entered with scarcely a preliminary knock. "Oh . . . excuse me, sir, but—Master Denis —"

Behind her, at that instant, Denis himself appeared, tearfully distraught.

"What is it?" I said, pushing Clara aside and catching him up in my arms. "What's happened?"

But for a while, after I had carried him back to bed, he refused to tell us. It was only, at first, from Clara that we discovered that Raoul must have stealthily crept from his room, traversed the intervening corridors, and visited the boy. Clara had heard a cry from within the bedroom and seen Raoul emerging just as she arrived upon the scene.

Furious, I was starting off there and then for Raoul's attic, but Goderich restrained me. "Let me," he said. "I'll go."

He was away a long time, and when he returned his words further amazed me.

"Well . . . I give up. I'm not a doctor. Doctors don't see such things . . . Call me a bald-headed Belgian and be done with it . . . I give it up!"

"What do you mean?"

"Why, when I got there, the fellow was smiling—by the way, has he a face to smile with? I'm never sure . . . was sort of smiling and holding out his arm and saying "*guéri, guéri*", like a cheshire cat . . . if they do . . . I—I'm a bit overcome . . ."

"You mean—?"

"I mean that it *was* cured, *is* cured. A little swelling, and he's a normal slight fever. Here, gimme a tot of your Glenlivet . . . I tell you, I give up."

This episode, itself grotesque, marked the beginning of a fresh, more ominous phase in my relationship with Raoul, and brought into my mind's open a host of doubts and until then but dimly realised fears. Just as the startled eye may all at once perceive the latent shapes of horror in the far, nobly drifting clouds and summer leaves, or as the meek familiar pattern of a wallpaper may spring into a sudden tracery of hell, so now the course of these events revealed a darker trend. The unaccountable affair of Raoul's arm had left me quite uncertain what to believe or disbelieve or what might happen next.

Circumstances had forced me to admit Goderich to my confidence, yet for a while we each fought shy of a direct discussion. What had occurred was so fantastically out of line with ordinary experience that we had, I suppose, to try somehow to deny and to discredit it a little even to ourselves.

Raoul made a complete recovery, and my determination to evict him was renewed. Denis however remained by no means well and I still shrank from distressing him. As if guessing what I meditated he had grown louder than usual in his companion's praises.

"You don't like him," he accused, reproachfully yet with a suppressed tight smile that had about it—how shall I express it?—a sort of odd repugnant coyness.

"I—well, I just don't see anything much in him . . . He can't stay here forever."

"Why, what harm does he do? I *wish* you liked him . . ."

I did not answer and we turned presently to other topics, but I continued baffled and, in some deeper sense, dismayed. It might be, as Denis said, that Raoul appeared to do no active harm, but it was this very negativity that partly was the trouble and made his evident attraction for my boy so utterly incomprehensible. The fellow, in his coarse labourer's clothes and ridiculous mittens, was an incongruity and an excrescence on the English countryside—and yet his most outstanding characteristic, to be paradoxical, was his characterlessness. He seemed as sinisterly unresponsive and empty of emotion as a robot. of emotion as a robot.

The date when Denis should have returned to school was passed. He had got better, then had a relapse, developing a variety of low undulant fever. An X-ray of his chest reassured me as to the state of his lungs, but the symptoms did not abate.

I was disappointed also in finding it, now, the harder to give Raoul his *congé*, and I could not but connect the two things in my mind. Raoul, I was certain, was somehow the cause of Denis's poor appetite, his wan and wasted look, and alternating fits of nervous stimulation and depression. Denis slept in a room close to mine, and once or twice I fancied I heard noises of bumping and what I could then only describe as a kind of dull sustained metallic humming coming from it. A dark suspicion visited me. Could Raoul be there? But on softly opening the door I found Denis alone and apparently asleep. The noises, if there had been any, had entirely ceased.

However, and recalling the anomaly—or prodigy—of the instantaneously healed arm, I remained still convinced that Raoul must be, ultimately, their author.

This instinct or persuasion—that Raoul was the source of some pernicious influence destructive of my boy—gained steady strength. Denis's manner to me had changed, and his constant terror that I should part him from his strange playmate was obvious. While, more specifically, the noises I had heard *were* noises, I would swear it. They



increased towards midnight but for a time, whenever I approached, died down.

Goderich, up to a point, did what he could, but was, I felt, as well aware as I that tonics and cough mixtures did not touch the matter's root. At last, after I had told him of the odd sounds, he remarked, mildly: "If I were you, Habgood, I *would* consider getting rid of that chap "Raoul", you know . . . I really would."

The restraint of this recommendation was almost comical, but I did not smile.

"Do you know anything *about* him? I was just wondering if, by any change, he had ever had anything to do with your wife's family-worked for them once maybe, and used that as an introduction to you? I'm only guessing . . ."

"Oh, no," I replied confidently enough. "Denis chummed up with the beauty in the Vaignon's village in Auvergne, that's all."

"These noises—is there ever anything broken or disarranged as well, after you hear them?"

"No, I've—wait a bit though . . ." Yes, I remembered, I *had* found a vase smashed once, and more than once had noticed drawers pulled out, and a general air of untidiness or confusion. I told Goderich so.

"Well, pass the word if that sort of thing hots up. And, seriously, I *should* give that chap the boot. It'll upset the lad, but—I should risk it."

When Goderich had gone I pondered his indubitably sound advice lugubriously. I could readily guess what had been at the back of his mind in asking, as to the noises, whether anything had been broken or moved about, yet the notion of poltergeist activities, while certainly sufficiently unpleasant, did not appear, entirely, to fit the case. They might, for all I knew, be present but, even so, would fall short of providing a complete explanation.

For, possibly, the hundredth time I vowed that Raoul *must* go; and indeed, quite apart from my own resolutions, matters were coming to a head. The commotions in Denis's room increased, being heard now by the servants, and were at last admitted by Denis himself. He denied all responsibility for them—in which I fully believed him—but did not seem afraid of, or disturbed by, them.

"But don't they wake you up and spoil your rest?"

"Oh . . . sometimes. But I don't care. I go to sleep again."

He looked restive under my interrogation. Nowadays, he was dressed and intermittently able to stroll out of doors if it were sunny, but spent much of his time in a *chaise-longue*, either in his room or, latterly, with Raoul, on a glass-roofed veranda. The pair would sit there, conversing softly, the man whistling sticks which he would

fashion into a variety of uncouth dolls, and my boy watching him, fascinatedly, as if the world's fate hung upon these operations.

Denis glanced up at me appealingly. "Promise me something."

"What?" But I guessed what it would be.

"That—that you won't send Raoul away."

"Well, as I've said already, he can't stay forever. Why do you think I shouldn't send him away?"

Denis's eyes, wide in some secret conjuring of disaster, met mine squarely. "It would kill me," he said simply.

As well as I might, although, I felt, evasively and with some sacrifice of honesty, I pacified him, and then left him. What *could* I do? Denis, of course, had been exaggerating and distraught, but such words, from a child . . . !

Of late, he had grown appreciably thinner, and I had only to contrast these waxen cheeks and pallid lips with his comparatively vigorous appearance a short month ago to realise the alarming swiftness of the change. To say I could not *prove* this to Raoul was idle. It was from Raoul's arrival that the symptoms dated, and it was from him, I was certain, that they sprang. This lay-figure—this *fantôme*, this hollow puppet—was the unhallowed instrument of a vile infestation that had assaulted Denis's whole physical and moral organism . . . Watching the two together (as I was often able from a window overlooking the veranda) I would be driven into a kind of agony of speculation as to the nature of the bond between them. My boy's face, raptly brooding or wearing that charmed smile I loathed even more, was usually averted, but I caught on it, sometimes, an enthralled abandon or absorption that would chill my blood. The creature Raoul, meanwhile, in his adorer's presence, would seem re-animated, made less neuter and less negative, as if his very being was enhanced and—how to put it?—as if it were at Denis's expense, by Denis's depletion of vitality, that he existed or that his actuality was heightened, as if, as the one waxed, the other shrank and waned . . . Scarcely troubling to hide my agitation as such ideas possessed me, I had tried, once or twice, to break in upon the pair in these ambiguous intimacies, but, I soon recognised, to no avail. The two would fall momentarily silent, Denis looking half guilty and half angry; then, as I knew, the instant that my back was turned their curious *tête-à-tête* would recommence.

Nevertheless, despite its accumulating worry and distraction, my life had still preserved a surface ordinariness and normality. Friends would occasionally drop in on me, or I on them, as heretofore, and I do not think, now, that they noticed much amiss. To be sure, they commented upon Denis's exhausted, drooping air and sympathised

with my anxiety about him, but they can have seen little of Raoul, and probably the "gossip" I had tended to imagine rife was confined chiefly to my own household.

There, certainly, there must have been some. Clara and old Jenny, even while not appreciating its significance, could not be blind (and deaf) to a good deal of what was happening under their noses, and their refusal to spread tales or "fuss" was testimony to their loyalty and long-suffering discretion.

As for Raoul's outward or official status, this had been regularised with less ado than I expected. A week or so after his arrival, on the insistence as I learned surprisedly of Denis, he had gone into Winchester and, Denis acting as interpreter, registered at the police station as an alien.

"What did he put himself down as?" I had asked disturbedly. "Not as my employee, I hope." And "Oh, no," Denis reassured me. "Just as a visitor. Just as your guest." That sounded well enough and I had grudgingly had to give Denis credit for his enterprise, but to confirm it I went in myself next day to Winchester. Yes, everything, I was told, was quite in order; oh yes, perfectly . . . I would have been interested to see the passport which must have been produced by Raoul, but had not pressed the matter.

I was recalling this piece of compliance with legalities—comfortingly factual and satisfactory-seeming so far as it went—to Goderich.

"M . . ." he mused dubiously. "The blighter's an infernal incubus whatever else he is or ain't, and I wish you could just show him the door. As I've confessed, I'm a finger or so out of my depth . . . The case is fairer game I fancy for a psychical researching bloke, or a psychiatrist. You're prejudiced, I realise, against *them*, and I'm not insisting, but—I'm worried about *you*, as well as Denis. I'll have two patients here, instead of one, directly . . ."

It was true that the business was wrecking me. Each day, I felt that I could stand no more and that, to end it, I should be driven to some act of violence.

When I, eventually, *was* so driven it appeared, for a short time, almost a relief.

The situation had continued to deteriorate. Denis, after a session with his dear, would wear an aspect veritably of the grave, and the idea which had been shaping in my mind before besieged me now with an increasing force. He is losing something, giving something. I thought, but he would not *want* to do that, do it deliberately, more or less voluntarily, for nothing. He must get something, be tempted by something, in return— but what—ah, what?

I lived in a waking nightmare, and the idea's hold on me grew

stronger. That Denis's delicately nurtured boyhood should fall prey to the appetites of an amorphous doll and become the meat of this uncanny zany seemed of all things the most abominable. The details and precise technique of such infernal commerce were beyond my fathoming, but that the ghastly trade existed and that Denis was its dedicated victim I felt positive. *Who* was this "Raoul"? When he had first arrived I had attempted, if simply in grudging "common courtesy", to engage him in conversation, but his thick Auvergnat dialect (as I presumed it) had defeated me, and nowadays I did not try to talk with him. As I watched him through the window, whittling his sticks and looking rather like a well-fed scarecrow, a speechless rage possessed me. Was the man knave or loon? For hours on end, complacently yet dully and only his hands moving, he would squat there, with the bland corpulence and mindless sedentary persistence of some gigantic blow-fly and my own hands would writhe in fury. "If I could catch him at it," I thought chokingly, "-if I could catch him at it I would strangle him . . ."

"If I could catch him . . ." Yes . . . I had, emotionally, a very vague and general notion or suspicion of what might be going on, but that was all. While, as for "evidence" . . . If this dumb, gangrened oaf were a variety of psychic leech as I surmised, able to tap and suck away my boy's vitality, his health and spiritual stamina, how was it done? It was probably, I realised, a vain or at least not ordinarily answerable question, yet the business, I argued, must have some sort of "rationale", some sort of place and time. During a good part of the day the pair were under-or liable, if I chose, to come under-my observation, and I hardly believed Denis received his consort in his bedroom, or vice versa. Latterly, Raoul had returned to his old sleeping-quarters in the loft, and in any case I had taken, I considered, adequate precautions against a nocturnal meeting. It was, however, then-between dusk and midnight-that the "noises" and other disturbances were most troublesome; and this too, I reflected, fitted in with my "theory" to some extent. Poltergeists, I had heard, were regarded as the prankish play of a surplus vital force or energy; and it was just after this force's flow, from Denis, had been stimulated but yet deprived, temporarily, of its accustomed receptacle in Raoul that the impish manifestations, centring round my boy, were commonest. As to the poltergeists themselves, if poltergeists they were, I was not primarily concerned about or bothered by them, and it was commentary enough upon the situation, as I saw it, that such a matter should be reckoned a mere minor and subsidiary nuisance.

Could it be only-how long?-barely five weeks today, since "Raoul" appeared . . . ?

At this time, my nights were as a rule dark stretches of tormented wakefulness, and when—not, often, till towards early morning—I did fall asleep, my rest would usually be broken, and haunted by appalling dreams.

One of these I especially remember.

I was in France, and Cécile was still with me. She had been recounting, it seemed, a legend of her native province and, with an unexplained urgency, was directing my attention to a particular passage in a book. We were both standing by a wide window, and the diabolically piled Silurian landscape of Auvergne stretched from us, for many leagues, under a breathless summer heat. But the odd thing was that Cécile was holding the book up in front of her face, and expecting me to read it *through* its covers and all the intervening pages! This, in some miraculous manner, I was able, in my dream, to do, though with difficulty and a sense of growing apprehension and oppression. Of one sentence, which she was extraordinarily anxious I should read, I could make out four words only: “. . . shall feast upon thee . . .” I was on the point, I thought, of deciphering the rest when suddenly the book slipped from my wife’s hands, revealing, not her face, but—empty air. With a cry of terror, I awoke.

The dream *was* only a dream, and probably, just before I fell asleep, my mind had again been running on Goderich’s query, once, as to a possible connection between Raoul and Cécile’s family; yet its tense, loaded flavour clung to me, and had the quality, somehow, of a presentiment.

I felt I had no need to ask of what. For a good while now I had been scarcely capable of keeping up the pretence of normal living, and a crisis would not be long delayed. “If I could catch him at it,” I found myself always repeating, “If I could catch him . . .”

And then, one day, I did.

It was an afternoon in October and Denis had been sitting, with his inseparable companion, on the sun-porch. Occasionally, he would desist from his talking and take up a book. It was a child’s book from the shelves of his old nursery, and I was mildly surprised that he should still be interested in what I thought he had outgrown.

The veranda, as I have said, was glass-topped, and there was a glass-paned wind-break at one end too. Branches of a wisteria tree at the side had been persuaded to straggle irregularly over part of the roof, and there were pots of hydrangeas along the front. The blooms, now, were past their best, but the place retained a faded greenness and a, to me, pleasantly shabby, half-neglected air which I should have been sorry to see give way to greater trimness.

A window, as I have also said, commanded a restricted view of this semi-enclosed space, and it was through this window (the high french window of a small spare parlour) that I had often, with an uneasiness that had mounted, as the weeks dragged by, to anguish, watched my boy and his companion. Yet what was the good of that, I asked myself? They must realise, by this, my bursting suspicions and antagonism, and, to them, my harrowed glances would be merely "spying". Denis was alienated from me—from his own father—and there was nothing I could do.

On this afternoon I quickly abandoned such entirely fruitless surveillance. I must find something to occupy my thoughts and hands or else go mad, and I had remembered a broken fence by the apple orchard that needed mending. But, having collected hammer and nails, I had scarcely started on my job before a fearful premonition of disaster gathered in my brain. I was aware, as if by a direct insight, of something enormously, incredibly evil. I must go back . . . This recognition of sheer calamity was so overpowering that I instantly dropped my tools and actually started running towards the house.

However, an instinct of discretion slowed my steps and I approached more cautiously. I could not, where I was, be seen from the veranda but, to make doubly sure, I took a devious route around a hedge of macaracarpa. Mingled with my apprehension was a swelling rage. How could I have been so blind, I remember thinking, to what was going on under my nose? For that was what it had amounted to. Why had I fancied that this infernal traffic necessarily required a set "rendez-vous", or any physical propinquity? "I will strangle him," I heard myself saying. "He deserves it and I shall do it." It was as if my fingers were upon the creature's neck, as if time were foreshortened or in some fashion telescoped, as if what was to happen had already happened and I was already there . . .

The October day was waning as, very quietly, I re-entered the parlour, tip-toed across the room, and looked.

Raoul, from where I stood, was invisible, but I could see Denis plainly, still sitting, as I had left him, in a battered old wicker chair, reading his book. Or rather, he was not so much "sitting" as crouching, hunched forward in an odd stiff posture on the edge of the chair-seat. A last shift of reddening light drew frail fire from his blond hair, but his face was hidden by the book.

An intimation of horror and of an unnameable corruption filled my heart. Something in Denis's queer locked attitude, in his whole appearance, utterly dismayed and sickened me.

Hardly breathing, I stole nearer. My movement was very soft, but Denis must have caught or have divined it, for he started violently.

The book slipped from his hands.

Upon his suddenly revealed face was an expression I will not describe. It was open before me, like a dreadful flower. Evil, we know, exacts its dues of ruin from the tenderest transgressors, but the reverse side of the matter is less willingly admitted and more shocking; and now the swift unveiling for me of sin's fleeting wage to my unhappy boy was beyond words appalling.

I would, if I could, have shut my eyes on what I had surprised. Denis's features, fixed in their long enchantment, wore a look that was a travesty of boyhood and a blasphemy of all my memories of him. The face, in its ecstasy, was laced and hemmed, and old, with an oldness that had nothing to do with years. Watching him, while the running sands of his being received their frightful recompense, I too was a prisoner to an unreal eternity, though in my case of anguish.

Then, instantaneously, the spell was broken, as Denis gave a low despairing cry. I flung apart the french windows and dashed on to the veranda.

Where was Raoul? Denis, I must subconsciously have told myself, would recover presently from his half-swoon and my first business was with his despoiler. Had the thing vanished? Not altogether. Below the veranda, in the direction of the shrubbery, I indistinctly glimpsed it, already in lumbering flight.

I caught it up beside the hedge of *macracarpa*, making for the coach-house. The figure, shadowy in the fading light, had turned at my approach and in an odd ineffective way put up a fumbling arm to keep me off.

My hands closed round its throat and for a while we struggled, swaying. Some seconds passed, and as yet the loathsome ninny had remained quite silent, but, all at once, I heard a little noise. It is said that certain creatures, ordinarily voiceless, may in extremity, find feeble tongue—that, in the agony of boiling, wretched lobsters compass a last faint unexampled squeak—and it was, now, of such a puny cry that I was put in mind. The sound filled me with revulsion.

My fingers pressed more strongly, Raoul, as we grappled, was being forced slowly backwards towards a tree-trunk, against which it was my idea to pin him and . . .

Either he had managed to trip me, or I had slipped and stumbled. The two of us crashed heavily, I uppermost. For some seconds longer I was still aware of him beneath me, writhing and battling, yet, somehow, eluding me; but the next moment, he had gone.

Dazedly, I picked myself up and gazed round me in search of the thing that had melted into vacancy from my grasp; and there was

no sign of it, anywhere at all.

## 2

They were black days that followed—I cannot convey *how* black. Though, with the exit of Denis's sinister playfellow, the worst seemed over, I felt in my heart, chilly, that this was only an uneasy breathing-space and that the story, yet, was far from done.

"Breathing-space"—no, it was not really even that. Raoul, I hoped, was banished, but his work remained. Denis was ill. Staring at me with horror and aversion, as if *I* were the sole author of his misery, he could scarcely bear that I should speak to his or go near his bed. The loss, I recognised with anguish, of his frightful parasite and paramour had virtually prostrated him, and he had ceased to be the boy Cécile and I had loved.

As to the eerie lummoX who had plagued us, I concluded that he had succeeded, somehow, in wriggling free from me and fleeing, that he would probably make his way back to France, and that, at least in person (if he *were* a person) he would trouble us no more. Or rather, this was what I tried to tell myself I had concluded. Truth is not necessarily or always "sober", and there was something here, I realised inwardly, of which all ordinary "sane" explanations and conjectures failed to take account.

Denis, when I had re-entered the house after Raoul's flight, had been in a half-faint. The servants, roused by my running footsteps along the veranda, had found him lying by the chair, and carried him to his room. Reviving, he had set up a low continuous moaning which did not abate till Goderich, whom I had at once rung up, had given him a sedative. That had secured him a night's sleep; but next day, as I have said, he would hardly suffer my approach, and once had even barricaded his door against me. I was at my wit's end, and terrified less he should do himself an injury.

Goderich shared my anxiety.

"Have you discovered any more about this unholy creature, now he's gone?" he asked.

"Any more?" Why, how—

"I mean that, now he *has* gone, tongues might wag a bit more freely. Your servants', for instance . . ."

"Oh yes," I agreed. "yes . . . plenty of that!"

It was a fact that Jenny and Clara had unbosomed themselves to



me of a good deal as to Raoul and their sentiments towards him which they had hitherto repressed—though without adding materially to my actual information. I told Goderich so.

"How did you explain the fellow's sudden disappearance to them?"

"I didn't. In any detail. They must have guessed that I—well, chased him off. I don't think they cared how he went, as long as he went."

"M . . . well, honestly, I feel I can't do much. I wish you *would* try a psychiatrist . . ."

But I was not ready for that, yet. And was there, possibly, an ever so slightly hurt or reproachful tone in my friend's voice? If so, it must have been because he could divine that with him too, in my description of the final scene, I had been reticent of what I had called "details" . . .

Denis recovered to the extent of leaving his bed and room and occasionally loitering, alone, about the orchard and the meadow; but we were strangers to each other. My acquaintance, or partial acquaintance, with his dreadful secret made me a terror to him, and there seemed something pathetically horrible in the evident efforts of this child to wrest the situation to his own partisan, extenuating view of it—to digest, modify or soften it so as to render it more tolerable to him, and to see me, not Raoul, as his enemy.

It could not, I would think, go on like this. How, if I lived to be a hundred, could I forget—or *he* forget that I must still remember? I would remind him always. As he grew up, if not already, in a sham so poignantly embarrassed, he would wish my death . . .

Thus, for a week or so, matters continued. My uncertainty as to what had really happened to Raoul prevented my finding much consolation even in his absence, and soon after his disappearance I had a visit from the Winchester City police. "Privache." they said (at first I barely recalled the fellow's surname) had failed to report at the expiration of one month's residence—and was he with me still? I could only reply, with a modicum of truth, that he had run off suddenly, I had no notion where. "Run off?" "Yes." I explained that the defaulter was a friend of my boy's of whom I had practically no knowledge; and I could see that my worthy—and, to me, very respectful—constable was dissatisfied and puzzled. "He should 'a checked out properly," he grumbled. "If 'e went back to France, now, there'd be trouble and an 'itch, you see, o' some kind, at the port."

Meanwhile the improvement in Denis's condition had been, at least superficially, maintained. That was, he looked a shade less pale and had a better appetite. The nightly thumpings, hummings and (a new ingredient) derisive hootings had, however, increased, the racket

finally attaining such proportions that, out of considerations for my domestics' rest, I had his bedroom changed to one as far from theirs as possible.

To me, his manner remained stubbornly hostile. I had pleadingly attempted to get his to speak openly, frankly and give me his own version of affairs, but quite in vain. It seemed but too apparent that he had suffered a veritable bereavement and was still pining for his vanished mate. Reluctantly, I was beginning to resign myself to taking Goderich's advice and trying a psychiatrist. This course would pretty evidently expose me, as well as the patient proper, to a good deal of awkwardness and incredulous silly catechisings, but I must shirk no measure that might restore my boy.

The leaves were falling and the October days growing colder when I happened to receive a note reminding me of the approaching anniversary dinner of my old regiment. I had never missed attending it, and the formal invitation card was enclosed, but now I had no heart to go, and besides it would be out of the question. On the other hand, it was from Winchester, barely six miles away, that Mayfield, who had been my adjutant and was organising the affair this year, had written me. He chanced, he told me, to be spending the inside of a week there on business—and he was probably expecting, I surmised, that I should ask him to stay with me instead of at his hotel, at any rate for Saturday and Sunday.

This too, as matters were, was scarcely practicable, but the least I could do, I thought, was to run over to Winchester and see him. I decided to risk leaving Denis in Jenny's and Clara's care, and drove off after lunch.

My chat with Mayfield, to whom I explained the position so far as necessary, was as pleasant as anything could be in my state of worry about Denis, but I hurried home from it so as to arrive by tea-time.

Clara and Jenny, to my dismay, were both waiting for me at the porch, and their first words, as I jumped out of the car, told me the worst.

Denis had gone.

Self-reproach was as useless as unavoidable. I had to act.

"When did you miss him?" I asked.

It had been only twenty minutes ago. He had been on the veranda, and then, no longer seeing him there and wishing to reassure themselves, they had looked for him. His room was empty, and fairly tidy, but a small suit-case was undiscoverable, likewise some socks and a shirt. The most conclusive piece of evidence, however, which seemed to rule out hope that he had merely set off for a walk and might return, was the fact that Jenny's room also had been entered,

and her money stolen.

"How much?"

"Four pounds ten, sir. I—I had it in a little china box and was going to bank it Tuesday."

Expecting me at any moment, they had not as yet given an alarm to the police, and I decided, rather than telephone, to drive back again myself to Winchester. Meanwhile, Jenny could ring me at the police station if my poor truant did, after all, return.

The desk sergeant knew me well and listened attentively to my story. "It's early yet," he encouraged, "and he *may* be just—just larking. But of course we'll notify it and alert other stations round about. Fifteen now . . . He can't be very far."

"And watch the ports too," I reminded him. My first thought, naturally, had been of Raoul, and my first fear that Denis was rejoining him.

"Oh, yes, we'll do that, as routine—although he couldn't get across, you know, without a passport."

As to that I had, privately, my doubts. Given sufficient determination, there *were* ways of doing it, as a recent instance happened to have shown.

After a further consultation—this time with the local superintendent in his adjoining sanctum—I drove home.

"No news, I suppose, Jenny?"

"No, sir."

With what fortitude we could we resigned ourselves, as remorseful empty hours passed, to the wretched, and in my case almost sleepless, night.

Feeling that the emergency had more than justified my breaking any rule of silence, I sent a wire of inquiry to M. Vaignon. An answer arrived, fairly promptly: "Not here yet."

This left me more "up in the air" than ever, and in vain did I strive to supply, as it were, the real and un-telegraphable intonation of the word "yet". It sounded as if M. Vaignon rather expected that Denis *might* come, later—but I could not be sure.

I returned to the question of the passport. Denis *had* had a passport—an individual one, to allow of his escort sometimes by Flébard and sometimes by myself. But I had locked it up after his last trip, and had it locked up still. In any case, I thought, he must have realised that, before he could possibly reach the coast, the dock police would have been warned, so that the document would be useless to him.

The Winchester district, I was told, had been combed thoroughly

without result and, as time passed, it surprised me that a boy could elude the police net for so long. It argued, certainly, either a degree of ineptitude on the one side or considerable adroitness and resource upon the other. Perhaps, whatever official incredulity might say, Denis had succeeded, by walking only at night and spending each day up a tree (in a manner I had read of) in striking a place where French fishing-boats put in, and then bribed some sailor into smuggling him across . . .

This notion was if anything strengthened by a discovery made by Clara when the hunt was six days old. She ran excitedly to me in my study one morning, crying: "Oh, we've found something!"

It transpired that, in cleaning out the loft, she had come upon two loaves, two tins of sardines and a can-opener, a jar of marmalade and the suit-case, which was empty—a veritable *cache*!

These objects, which I went with her to inspect, had been hidden under sacking near a back door giving on to a short outer stair by which access could be gained to the loft without first passing through the coach-house below. Close by, I noticed with aversion, was a collection of the grotesque wooden dolls, something like ninepins, which Raoul had been used to whittle and—most significantly—an empty opened tin and scattered crumbs showed that one meal at least had been consumed up there already.

However illogically, this find, and particularly the abandoned suit-case, established as an emotional certainty in my mind the belief that Denis had managed to reach France, or was upon his way there. He had been clever enough, I told myself, to lie hidden in the immediate vicinity while the search was most intensive, and then to slip off by night as I had supposed. Yes, that was it—that must be it! I came to a prompt decision.

That very afternoon, having rung Goderich to tell him what I contemplated, I set off for Southampton, calling in at the Winchester police station *en route*. I could see that my plan to "pursue" (they would not admit that it *was* that) my boy to France had met with official scepticism and disfavour, but—though I did concur in the suggestion that a watch be set, if all too tardily, around the loft—I would not allow the cold water thrown on it to weaken my resolve.

And, as it happened, while I was not to know it then, I had only as it were anticipated matters by a single night. A second wire from M. Vaignon, I learned later, "Denis here", arrived for me the morning after I had left.

Once more, the prosaic and accustomed train, my gentle heaving bunk upon the almost accustomed channel packet, and the familiar harbour

of Le Havre at misty dawn. The same, yes all the same, and yet how different! Many times had I made this crossing, but with a heart un racked, as now, by care.

Eating my *petit déjeuner* in the station buffet when I had passed through the customs, I brought a newspaper and a further supply of brioches and again boarded the train.

Paris and lunch, then southwards—on to what?? As we begun to breast the gradual ascent towards the *massif* a vague but dreadful apprehension grew upon me. I had dashed off from England, I realised, largely because inaction had become intolerable—yet here, in France, I quailed. It was as if, while I approached that black and tortured landscape of Auvergne, I were adventuring foolhardy into some citadel of evil powers, pitting my puny strength against a host of devils.

I took up my newspaper and tried to read—in vain. Denis, I thought, where are you? What are you doing now—and why?

With an effort, I forced myself to re-examine, as critically and calmly as I might, the chain of circumstances that had led to my being where I was, and upon such a quest.

Vaignon—and Raoul . . . The whole business of the holiday exchanges had been so casual, so casual, so benign, and yet—yes, . . . There must be some connection, beyond mere coincidence, between the two.

I recalled M. Vaignon's brooding and half-guilty looks—and that peculiar scrap of conversation I had overheard. "It has *come again*," he had said then to Flébard. What had "come again"? Could it . . .

Suddenly my mind snapped on something, and deliberately, for a second, I made it blank, as if afraid of the light that threatened all at once to flood it. I even grabbed my paper and feigned a furious engrossment in its long columns of advertisements. Next moment, however, I gave up the pretence, and a sigh escaped me—a sort of cold sigh of recognition and admission. "Could it . . . ?" Why yes, of course it could. The "It" of M. Vaignon's terrified lament was—Raoul.

How this lurking while fairly obvious conjecture had managed to get itself hushed up in the recesses of my brain (as I am sure it had) for such a time before issuing forth at last to startle me I did not know. But I found it, now, a highly disturbing one. Without, as yet, being able to appreciate all its implications I felt, dimly, a kind of spreading illumination, as though the contours of some formidable truth would presently emerge.

To reach Foant I had, directly, to change to a slower train, with a number of stops. The countryside remained, on the whole, placidly

pastoral, but I fancied I began to detect in it, here and there, faint earnestness or intimations of that sinister quality which the Auvergne whither I travelled had always held for me. M. Vaignon would be prepared for my coming, since I had telegraphed him from Le Havre, but what sort of welcome he would accord me I had no idea. I had not, it must be remembered, received the wire from him that would arrive at "Ashroft" the next morning, and I had nothing, at the moment, but my impulsive intuition to lead me to suppose Denis at the château.

The sun was westering as we slackened speed for Foant, and before that, of course, the scenery had assumed the intimidating gigantism and cataclysmic look of violence which, every time I visited the place, had sent a shiver up my spine.

Alighting, I stared round me but could see no one, on my own island platform or on either of the other two except the ticket collector and a couple of peasant women. Perhaps M. Vaignon was so indignant at my flat defiance of his previous virtual prohibition that he was not sending anyone to meet me! Owing to his strange imposition of silence I had felt unable to write to him—or question him maybe concerning Raoul—and though I now suspected him of knowing more about it than he might confess, his official state was one of ignorance, and he might not appreciate the seriousness of the case.

For a quarter of an hour I waited impatiently in the little *selle d'attente*. Had M. Vaignon actually resolved to deny me his hospitality? But no; he *had* answered my first wire, and surely, in common humanity, he couldn't be such a bear—and such a brute!

I was however on the point either of telephoning the château or, without doing so, of hiring, if I could, a taxi, when a car hurtled furiously into the station yard. It hurtled in *so* furiously that I experienced a curious start of anticlimax at sight of the form that crawled feebly out from the driving-seat.

The figure advanced immediately, with a sort of frenzied impetuous hobble, towards me.

Yes, it was M. Vaignon.

### 3

Question and answer between us tumbled over each other, standing on no ceremony of greeting. "Is he with you?"

"Yes . . . but you could not have my telegram so soon."

"Is he-all right?"

"He-you will see . . ."

We got into the car. "Flébard", M. Vaignon explained interjectorily, "has left, and it is I who am chauffeur. I fear I am late."

I mumbled something, to which he paid no attention. We had shot out of the station yard into the gathering dusk of the highway, M. Vaignon still driving like a maniac. His manner, notwithstanding, had a kind of distraught, debonair moroseness, and the conditions generally, as we careered wildly onwards, were unfavourable to conversation. Yet I did, once, attempt it. "Denis has been terribly ill," I said. "He is not himself, or he would not have run away, and I would not have had to trouble you. How does he seem, now?"

M. Vaignon's nearer shoulder gave me an absent shrug. "I cannot tell you . . . We are all bedevilled, *n'est-ce pas*, and the evil days are on us. They are on your boy, who does not know you are here, but won't, I bet you, let you talk to him, or get within ten feet of him . . ."

My heart sank, but despair goaded me to a flare of anger too.

"We shall see about that!" I said.

The château, when we entered it at nightfall, was a place of dark, uneasy stillness. A man whose face was unfamiliar had admitted us and he immediately retreated again from us.

"Where is Denis?" I asked M. Vaignon. "Where is he?"

We had passed, from the hall, into a small *salon* to the left, wherein, I remembered, it had once been promised that Denis should devote a daily hour to the study of De Musset, the Dumas and Victor Hugo. Whether he had ever done so I doubted, but two walls of the room were book-lined.

"Where is he?" I repeated, but at this very instant, hearing a step along the hall, I glanced up towards the door, and there, staring back frozenly at me, was-Denis.

It was a glimpse only that I had of him for with a kind of indignantly affrighted "*Ah . . .*" he vanished. I rushed out after him into the hall, calling his name.

A man—it was he who had let us in—stood there. "Dinner will be—" he was beginning.

"Where is my boy, *le jeune garçon*?" I interrupted him. "Which way did he go just now? Which is his room?"

The fellow regarded me consideringly as he replied, slowly: The same . . . but -" He stopped, then, with a quick and as if guilty or surreptitious movement, crossed himself.

Denis's old room was on the first floor, by the stairhead. Having run up to it, I tried the door, but it was locked and there was no answer to my knocks. "Denis!" I cried. "Denis, are you there?"

Not a sound. It was just possible though most unlikely that the door had been locked from the outside. I knocked and called again, in vain.

Descending to the *salon*, I debated, wretchedly. It appeared but too evident that M. Vaignon had spoken truly and that Denis had not ceased to regard me as his enemy. I recalled, in misery, the intonation of his "*Ah . . . !*" when he caught sight of me some moments since. It had been an "*Ah!*" not merely of disconcertment and dismay but, I realised, of actual execration.

M. Vaignon had come out into the hall. "You see," he murmured drily, "I was right . . ."

At dinner, no place was laid for Denis, and M. Vaignon must have noticed my disappointedly inquiring glances. In the presence, however, of the ever-attendant Dorlot (as, I gathered, was his name) nothing of any importance could be said, and our talk was of trivialities.

Meanwhile, my mind ran feverishly on what I had so far discovered. It had already seen, alas, enough to recognise that matters could not be adjusted offhand, or hurried, and that the home-bringing of my poor prodigal would prove no simple and probably no brief procedure. There would be difficulties, especially in a foreign country, about compelling him, forcibly, to go with me, and, in consulting with M. Vaignon and striving to come at the inner truth of the whole business, I must do what I could to practise greater patience and restraint.

After the meal I again followed M. Vaignon into the *salon*, where he motioned me to a seat by the fire.

"As you will doubtless have observed," he began immediately, anticipating one, though certainly not the most pressing, of the questions that burned upon my tongue, "Marcel and Augustine are gone. They were in all benevolence snatched from me by an aunt, my sister-in-law, who considered the atmosphere here not—not altogether sympathetic to young children . . . *Mon dieu*, ha, ha . . . how very right she was . . . !"

My good resolutions, at such words, broke down, and I burst out: "And my child, *Monsieur*, what about *him*? He wasn't at dinner with us. Where is he *now*? Is he safe *now*, this minute . . . ? When did he come here, and why? You have told me nothing yet. There is a person, a creature, "*Raoul*", who—"

"*Ah, ça . . . !*" M. Vaignon had raised a nervously, or it may only have been contemptuously, deprecating hand to check me. "Let us not speak that name too loudly! It is a name, to me, of ridicule and of annoyance; to others, many people, whose susceptibilities one must



regard, of-well, of something infinitely worse. It—"

He paused, continuing presently: "You are bound, now that you are here, to hear of this—this nonsense—anyhow, and I may just as well prepare you and forewarn you . . . *Enfin*—it was of that, in fact, I wrote to you, or anyhow of that that I was thinking when I advised you in my letter not to send me your boy again. When I told you I was the victim of a persecution, as, in a mood of some exasperation, I recall I did, I was hardly exaggerating, and—"

"But," I broke in, "I don't understand how—" I hesitated, for my most urgent question would not be repressed. "Is he—is it—here now?"

M. Vaignon considered me warily. "It—if we are to call this damnable old wives" tale an "it"—is not here, or active, now. That is to say—*enfin*, it is not here now . . . "

After a moment he went on, morosely: "As for "understanding" . . . There are things of which one can perceive the effect, upon oneself and others, but which one may not altogether "understand", and may indeed, in a sense, entirely repudiate. As I have just told you, this— this nuisance, this most supreme and consummate nuisance—is not with us, *actuellement*, but your boy—your boy arrived here late last night, in—in search of it. He is trying—he will do his best, to get it back . . . "

It would be hard to describe the unhappy confusion into which these words had thrown me. What was I to believe? M. Vaignon had alluded almost scoffingly to Raoul as if to a sort of troublesome but relatively minor notifiable disease or garden pest—much as he might have spoken of some curiously periodic scarlatina or potato-blight!—yet underneath his shrugging air I could divine a genuine and continuing apprehension.

He rose abruptly, with an access of agitation. "This thing—this kind of molestation, or superstition of a molestation—is not entirely unexampled if one may credit certain authors, certain bogeymongers, of—oh, of at least two centuries and more ago . . . " He had moved to the bookshelves, ran a finger along the tops of a few heavy-looking tomes, and half pulled one out. "No matter . . . " he said, pushing the volume into place again. "It is there . . . and duly catalogued, though under an evasive appellation. They called these—these preposterousnesses, or the cast of mind that fostered and engendered them, "*sans noms*"—simply that. The "nameless" . . . "

Undecidedly, he resumed his seat. "I—I give you my word of honour that, when I first met you and until recently, this particular—"nameless" had not, to my recognition, bothered us, or at all events . . . I do not deny that it, or the—the rumour of it, was supposed to *have* bothered us in the past, but it was presumed to be gone.

*Tant même*, there was a technical, an academic risk of which I might no doubt have warned you earlier . . . ”

A tide of bewildered anger swelled in me. “Yes,” I said bitterly, “rumour” or not, whatever the thing was, and whether we are mad or sane, you might indeed! You certainly should have warned me!”

“Yet you would have laughed, and rightly or *au moins* most excusably, at such a history. You would have derided it and me.”

“And what would that have mattered if I *had*?” I almost shouted, unable longer to contain the explosion of impatience. I had had to wait, on tenterhooks, all through the drive from Foant and then through dinner to ask anything of what I had been bursting desperately to ask—and now, when I could at least demand straightforward answers, I was treated to nothing but sidesteppings and prevarications.

M. Vaignon was silent, his head bowed. I was entirely convinced that he knew very well he had not told me the whole story and was still keeping something back.

“This—this “nameless”,” I insisted. “What *is* it? I mean this particular specimen . . . We are just beating round the bush about it all and I can’t in the least follow what it really is you think you are telling me—if you *are* telling me. What *is* it? That’s what I’ve got to know! But whatever it is you surely could have stopped my boy from—from meeting it. *He* told me it was someone he—chummed up with in the village. A kind of semi-vagrant, it sounded, but . . . ”

My words trailed away. M. Vaignon, his face white under my accusation, twirled his brandy of which a glass was before me too, untasted.

He raised his own glass all at once and drained it. His expression showed an almost morbid exaltation.

“*Ah, bah!*” “It”, you say, “*it*” . . . ! *Eh bien* . . . “*It*” is something, if you please, that ebbs and flows and that refuses to be satisfactorily dead, something that crops up and comes and goes, and is reputed to have plagued my family through three generations; something that has nourished itself, at intervals, so the tale runs, at our expense and owes its very being and persistence to its victims. All that—ha, ha! —is in the text book . . . Oh, we are not unique in this affliction. “The So-and-so’s,” you will hear, “—ah yes, a fine old family, *but*—they have a *sans-nom* . . . ” As for this—this particular example. as you say, it has a human shape, which you have seen. It eats, drinks, sleeps as other men, while it exists. *Mon dieu* . . . “*it*” has even mended my needles, and bought soap or tea or salt and the *épicerie*, before I suspected it and till it was recognised . . . And then, when it was recognised—oh what a how-d’ye-do . . . ! *Surtout*, even, it must, they

say, have an--an attachment. And--its attachment must be young. If and when its victim, its *petit ami*, dies, the pest transfers its--its attentions, we are to believe, to the children of another, and the nearest branch. The thing is amorous and--and rapacious. *Ah, nom d'un nom, quelle histoire! Quel fumisterie! Quelle imbécilité! C'est ridicule, fantastique, incroyable . . . !*"

His voice had risen wildly on a note, it might be equally of scorn or terror as a knock, at first soft, then louder, was repeated on the door. The man Dorlot entered, wearing a look of remonstrance.

"*Monsieur* should know that such excitement, of which the noise has penetrated to the kitchen, is very bad for him. Go to bed, *Monsieur*, I advise it. Go to bed, where you may forget our troubles possibly in sleep."

Meekly accepting the rebuke--and, I imagined, rather welcoming the excuse to escape further questioning--M. Vaignon said, to me: "Dorlot is right, and, if you will forgive me, I shall leave you now. My health, latterly, is precarious . . . Dorlot will give you anything you require. But first"--he turned to the man--"where is the young *monsieur*? Is he in his room, and--and quiet?"

"Yes; he is in his room, as is to be inferred from the very fact that his room is *not* entirely quiet. The noises are there again, while not, as yet, excessive."

My heart sank at these words; though they conveyed nothing new. The "poltergeist" disturbances, however, were connected in my mind with Raoul, and their continuance depressed me.

"Good-night . . ." said M. Vaignon.

I was desperately tired, but lingered a little longer in the "library".

What, honestly, could I believe, and what try, still, to disbelieve? Ordinarily, of course, the recital which my host had just concluded would be dismissible as a farrago of lurid and unpleasant nonsense--but I had had experience, alas, myself, of what too plainly contradicted this consoling view.

As I was going over what M. Vaignon had said, and sipping my brandy at last, my eye fell on the volume he had started to pull out from the shelves. It protruded slightly still, and I got up and took it to my seat.

*Légendes d'Autrefois* the tome was entitled, tritely, but I had scarcely flicked over a haphazard page or two before I read, as if my glance had been directed to the spot: ". . . et, c'est à dire, les morts se régaleront des vivants . . ."

I experienced a cold grue of that sort of surprise which is not surprise at all, but colder confirmation, and immediately restored the

volume. "The dead shall feast upon the living" . . . There it was, and I did not want, at present, to read more. It was the completion of the passage in that dream that I had had, some weeks ago, about my wife, holding the book before her non-existent face . . .

I don't know what had made me so optimistic, in leaving England, as to the prospect of an early return there with my boy. No doubt I had the legal right to compel him to come home, but if he still repulsed me and offered physical resistance the practical difficulties would be, to put it mildly, formidable. On the morning after my arrival and throughout that day and the next I had tried again to speak with him, but either his room would be locked and silent or, if I caught sight of him at all upon the stairs or in the grounds, he would take literally to his heels.

"Where does he eat?" I asked—for he continued absent from our meals—and it appeared that sometimes he would raid the larder and carry off his plunder to the fields. Neither M. Vaignon nor his domestics had any control over him, and, even if they had, I could not have relied on them to exercise it upon my behalf. As to the servants, they were in all respects so unco-operative as to be almost obstructionist, while, in particular, their extraordinary reticence caused me to think that they had probably been forbidden to "gossip" with me, upon this or any other subject.

How fervently I wished that Goderich were here! But of course he could not desert his patients at short notice, nor, obviously, was M. Vaignon's hospitality in my gift.

Denis, I found, had done as I had thought and managed to stow away upon a fishing-boat at Brixham. It had been evidently useless for him to pretend that his visit had my sanction and he must have known I would eventually pursue him—but, beyond his infatuated determination to be reunited with Raoul at any cost, I doubted whether he could have had much of a settled plan of action and campaign. He had steered as clear as possible, it seemed, of M. Vaignon and so far as I could gather had confided the manner of his crossing only—half inadvertently—to Dorlot, who had retailed the story subsequently to his master.

Well it was a beautiful kettle of fish all round. I sent a wire to the police at Winchester, reflecting what slight satisfaction it had brought me thus to have proved them wrong.

In my anxiety, I had little or no help from M. Vaignon. Either he was genuinely ill, or feigned it to avoid my "badgering". Never joining me at breakfast, he would retire, though with excuses, immediately

after lunch and dinner; and, since our talk on the first evening, had said nothing to me of the least seriousness, sincerity or moment as to what should have been our common problem.

Left to my own devices, I would wander wretchedly around the estate and nearer villages, exchanging a "*bonjour*" occasionally with some peasant, but often meeting no one, as I chose the less frequented paths. The autumn days were dull, but now and then a brighter spell invited me to extend my rambles towards a puy that topped a line of rocky hillocks to the north.

One afternoon—it was the fourth or fifth since my arrival—I had set out thither at about three o'clock. I paid no particular heed to where I was going, and walked on. I suppose, with my head bent in gloomy thought, for which I certainly had food enough.

Yes, the position was fantastic, and a description of it, given badly, would provoke only pitying disbelief. And yet the history was *true*. That was, I knew that as much of it as I had seen with my own eyes was true. As for the rest—for M. Vaignon's wild while half-contemptuous elaborations on the theme—I reserved judgement. He was a sick man, whatever the cause, and his troubles seemed reflected in the unprosperous, depleted and decayed condition generally of his estate and household. The château was in disrepair and its staff, whether by flight or by dismissal, reduced to an uneasy remnant. Why, for example, had the trusted Flébard left? My heart was leaden with misgiving. Could M. Vaignon—a diabolic suspicion flashed into my brain—could he, initially, have asked Denis to the château, or anyhow have gone on having him there, in order to—to safeguard *his* children? Could he, at one time, to protect *them*, to divert something from them and fasten it on Denis, have actually been tempted to promote and foster the disastrous intimacy between Raoul and my boy . . . ? But I rejected such a vile hypothesis as altogether too far-fetched. My mind, as well, must be infected to have harboured it, and . . .

Suddenly, rousing from my reverie, I looked about me. The country was unfamiliar and very lonely, and small half-ruined—church or chapel, with a graveyard attached, added to its general air of desolation. In that indifference of purpose which is born of mental exhaustion rather than of any, even "idle", curiosity. I entered the graveyard and wandered aimlessly among its tombs. Some distance off, I noticed, a man was wending towards me down the road ahead.

I loitered absently round the inside of the boundary wall. The burial-ground was evidently disused and the graves were untended, many overgrown with bramble or rank grass. Now and then a date caught my eye—1830, 1813, 1770 . . . Possibly the—all at once I stopped, transfixed, as in the silence, a name stole, staring back at me. It was

inscribed upon a headstone slightly taller than the rest, though lichen-coated, tilted, cracked and weather-worn as they. "Privache" . . . And, just decipherable below—yes. "**Raoul. Mourut 1873.**"

A footfall made me start. It was the man I had seen on the road and whose approach, over the grass, had been noiseless. He seemed a respectable, decent fellow of the sturdy "bon-homme" type, probably a small tradesman or petty farmer—but he was regarding me, and the grave, with a frown of sombre disapproval.

He gave a significant upward jerk of the head and pointed to the tomb. "*Monsieur* knows perhaps of whom that is the grave?"

In a double disconcertment I stammered, faintly: "Yes, I—I know the—no, I cannot, I—I mean it is the name, the same name as somebody's I know."

The man took a step backward, crossed himself, and said coldly: "Enough . . . then it is to be hoped that *Monsieur* knows also that it is a bad name . . . *Alors, bonjour, Monsieur.*"

He was going slowly away from me but, on an impulse, I detained him.

"Why, who—who was he?" I asked. "Was he a—a criminal, or—"

My tongue faltered, and, as the man's glance met mine searchingly, it was as if a thousand things had passed wordlessly between us.

"No, *Monsieur*, in life he was not a criminal but—" He paused, then, stooping, traced with a forefinger the date, 1873. "That, *Monsieur*, was when he died. It is there, cut in the stone, and is, so far as it goes, correct. My father was *maire* of the *commune* and could remember all about it. I have even, myself, seen the burial record, which was in the register of the parish before the amalgamation. I can tell you no more than that, if you please, *Monsieur*—that he died almost eighty years ago, in 1873 . . ."

Again he crossed himself, and this time, as he withdrew, I did not stay him. I was thrown, momentarily, into a kind of panic. In a sense, my talk several evenings since with M. Vaignon should have prepared me for this further shock, yet I still tended then, I think, to discount a good deal of his discourse as crazy ranting—which he had not repeated and, probably, repented. But now the story, borne out in another mouth, had gained fresh substance and solidarity. Something—a mortuary breath of evil—had addressed me, subverting reason and defeating sanity. "Raoul"—if it were he . . . dead eighty years ago . . . Or what would lead this steady countryman and sober citizen thus to accost me so suspiciously and reprehendingly?

Waiting only until he disappeared across a field, I walked quickly back to the château.

That same evening I got M. Vaignon's consent to my begging Goderich, if he could possibly arrange it, to join me at the earliest opportunity. I had spent six days here, quite uselessly. My boy remained obdurate in avoiding me, keeping out of doors as much as he could and eating his meals I knew not when nor precisely where. This could not go on indefinitely, and he must be removed somehow, but I did not feel confident of my ability to hale him home single-handed, or wish, either, to invoke police assistance, French or British. I worded my letter to Goderich very strongly and, having posted it, was slightly easier in mind.

Otherwise, I was more tortured by anxiety than ever, and my discovery of the lonely grave had had a horrible effect on me. Coupled with the queer manner of the honest fellow who had spoken to me beside it—his doubting, fearful looks and his ambiguous reticence—it left me prey to a complete bewilderment and cold dismay.

Of Denis, meanwhile, as I have just said, I caught only fleeting glimpses. M. Vaignon, who had warned me that he, Denis, would "try to get it back", pretended to have interceded with him, but on this I placed no least reliance. I had little real idea of what my boy did with himself all day, of whether he still slept in the same room (though I was assured this was so) or of when he fed, or bathed, or changed his clothes. As to this last point, I had brought with me for him some clean shirts, socks and underwear, which I had handed to Dorlot and were now, I was informed, in use. But, generally, it seemed to me, his condition was one almost of semi-vagabondage, the château being for him not much more than a base or headquarters from which to "forage" in the countryside.

However, the next morning I did have news of him which, while unreassuring, was somewhat more detailed than previous accounts. Denis, Dorlot remarked, had latterly been spending a good deal of his time in the east wing "near the tower". But on my asking what my boy was doing there the man had shrugged "*Qui sait, Monsieur?*" I have seen him reading, or carving wood with his knife . . . "

"Is he there now?"

"*Non, Monsieur.* It was yesterday and the day before. This morning he has gone out."

This conversation had been at my *petit déjeuner*, which I always had alone, my host preferring his brought to his bed. After the meal I busied myself in writing a short note to my faithful Jenny, from whom I had heard two days ago. She had reported all well at home, and that she and Clare were hoping, poor things, to welcome us *both* back very soon.

I went out to post my reply to her, struck, as I passed beneath the

*porte-cochère*, by the château's latterday appearance of neglect. It was as if it lay under a spell—as if some blight, of doom and galloping decay, attacked it. Yes—and assailed its inmates too, I thought—one Colonel Walter Habgood not excepted! *I*, to be sure, was only a temporary occupant of the place, a guest yet I was conscious, whenever I walked abroad, that something of its ill-repute attached to me. With the local peasantry *I*, too, was in bad odour, the carrier of an aura, an aroma, of the dimly sinister and menacing. And when I had mailed my letter to Goderich yesterday at the little office three kilos up the road to Foant whither I now and again was on my way, the postmistress had eyed me balefully, touching her scapula as I was leaving. Go where I might, a species of anxious hostility attended me, expressed in covert stares, in sullen glances, crossing and avoidances. Even the children scattered from my path.

What *was* the truth, I demanded for the hundredth time, about this whole fantastic business? These yokels (*and* M. Vaignon, I suspected) were abjectly superstition-ridden. You might suppose a recent world-war would have knocked such nonsense out of them, but—suddenly, and wryly, I laughed at myself—though it wasn't at all funny. Yes, that was rich! Talk of the pot and kettle . . . ! For *I* was equally in thrall to a grotesque myth with any of the folk I was deriding.

It was exasperating not to know quite what I did believe or disbelieve. Everything and everybody seemed to be conspiring to throw dust in my eyes and keep me ignominiously in the dark. Here was *I*, Denis's own father, thankful when I could pick up, as just now, a few crumbs of second-hand intelligence about him from a conceited surly menial like Dorlot! More than once, latterly, I had been tempted to question the fellow bluntly, about many things, but hitherto my pride had not allowed me to interrogate the man behind his master's back. As for the master aforesaid, M. Vaignon, since his first outburst, had retired completely into his shell and been as cordially informative as any oyster.

I felt I could endure this mystifying and maddening secretiveness no longer. I must request from someone—anyone—a forthright explanation of the whole engima and see, at least, what sort of answer was provoked. Accordingly, when I had posted my letter to Jenny, I asked the postmistress to direct me to some person of responsibility—the *maire*, perhaps, or school-master—with whom I could discuss a private matter.

The woman regarded me dirtily enough, replying only after a suspicious pause. "The *maire* is ill," she said, "but there is M. Boidilleule the *garde champêtre*, *qui était de la résistance* and is ill likewise, or M. Tanvy the *pharmacien*. M. Tanvy", she added more



amiably, "is very clever, and of a great discretion, having been a quartermaster in the army . . . Then there is too, of course, Père Puindison, the *curé* . . ."

Rejecting the belauded M. Tanvy, I decided on the *curé*—an obvious choice which it was strange had not occurred to me before. There was no difficulty in locating him. He had just returned from Mass and welcomed me into his *vicairie* politely.

Somewhat haltingly I outlined as much as necessary of my story, including particularly, my discovery of the grave. Was, I inquired, the "Raoul" from whom my boy had this unfortunate infatuation a grandson, possibly, of the deceased?

The *curé's* face had darkened and at my final question wore a look of, as it were, a scandalised discomfiture. I was quite sure he had known all about me in advance.

"*Franchement, Monsieur*, it is not easy to reply. This is a district *assez superstitieux* and . . . *Enfin*, the individual whose grave you saw up there at Saint Orvin had no descendants. He was, it would appear, a butler at the château Vaignon, where, actually, he died. But that was eighty years ago, and . . ."

"Yes, yes," I said. "But—but this other fellow, that my boy met . . . Who is *he*?"

The good father blinked at me morosely. He was an elderly, florid-visaged man, with eyes that were worldly but, at the moment, troubled and unsubtle.

"*Monsieur*," he said, reproachfully, "you come to me, like this, and ask me—what? To confirm and to endorse a doubt that has, beforehand, been implanted in your mind—or maybe to deny it. I can state to you only that the Privache we *know* of died in 1873. The rest is—is merely superstition."

"And the superstition is—?"

He shrugged weakly, uncomfortable and disdainfully apologetic under my pressure. "*Evidemment*, the superstition you insist that I enunciate so clearly is that the Privache who died in 1873 and he for whom, you say, your boy had this *engouement* are one and the same . . . *C'est ridicule! Alors* . . . And I have told you, *absolument*, all I can . . ."

His manner, while still courteous, showed the beginning of a self-protective frostiness, and again, marvelling, I felt defeated. All these folk, when you tried to tackle them and pin them down upon the subject of this preposterous myth, affected superiorly to scoff at it—yet all of them, in their hearts, were really scared of it!

Thanking the *curé*, I took my dissatisfied and disappointed leave.

I have been at the château just a week—an utterly, completely useless week!

Each day, I had sought every chance of pleading with my boy, so far quite unavailingly. Must I then drag him home a literal captive and so make him hate me worse than ever? Possibly, if need be, but not till I had tried every other, more persuasive measure. Denis was like a wild thing, a wild thing piteously spellbound and enchanted, and it would profit little, I thought, to trap and pinion the poor body if the spirit still eluded me. I wished to snare him—yes—but to snare the whole of him, and lovingly; and bonds and handcuffs seemed an unhappy way of doing this.

Yet if he would not voluntarily come with me there was nothing for it but a degree of force, and it had been with this necessity in closer prospect that I appealed to Goderich, whose sympathetically auxiliary convoy, at the pinch, would certainly be less humiliating than that of a police escort!

In this pass, M. Vaignon was a broken reed, his nerve-racked manition now, indeed, almost amounting to a kind of passive, undeclared resistance. And why, after exploding as violently as he had about his blessed "*sans-noms*", had he stopped short there? the *curé* had grudgingly enlightened me to the limit that his scruples or timidity allowed—but why couldn't M. Vaignon have told me all this, and more, himself?

I walked to the window of my breakfast room and surveyed the autumn fields. From here, they were visible, in brown or fallow squares, stretching irregularly up a saucer's rim to misty hillocks, and in one of them, far off, I fancied, with a start, that I saw Denis. But no, the figure was motionless, and I remembered now that it was only a scarecrow, lingering purposelessly in the stubble.

My letter should reach Goderich today, and, if and when he came, we could hold some sort of council of war. How glad I would be of his refreshing sanity and clearer judgement! My own ideas had become quite chaotic and my affronted reason hurled itself hour by hour against brick walls of contradiction. It was a veritable antinomy. On the one hand, here was the mid-twentieth century, with (even in this backwater) the trains, post, newspaper and radio (should M. Vaignon but elect to buy a set) and an occasional *avion* droning overhead; while, on the other, equally compulsive of assent, there lay—sheer medievalism, rank mythology, a weird anachronism of fantastic horror. The two worlds, though interpenetrating, were irreconcilable—and each was true.

I went undecidedly towards my room and then, passing it, along a series of corridors. I had often roamed unchallenged up and down

the château's twisting stairs, beneath its faded tapestries and seigneurial banners and across its echoing halls; and now, uneasily while unpremeditatedly enough, my steps trended in the direction of the east wing and its tower.

Nothing in particular rewarded my reconnoître, if it were one, though in a chamber just below the so-called "haunted" room I did find a few chips and shavings of the sticks, presumably that as Dorlot informed me, Denis had been whittling. It was not till I had redescended that a speculation springing from my recent conversation with the *curé* crossed my mind. "Raoul," Père Puindison had stated, had died in the château—and Denis, long ago, as I could now also remember, had said, in speaking of the turret room, that "someone died there".

Was the "someone" Raoul, and was it actually in the tower that he had died? It seemed more than probable.

I spent the rest of the morning and most of the afternoon in desultory "mooching", too anxious and distracted, till at least I had Goderich's reply, to settle definitely to anything.

My visit to the east wing and my ensuing conjecture about Raoul had, admittedly, disturbed me, but, beyond that, I seemed dimly conscious of some other cause of a vague apprehension or dissatisfaction. It was something—I had the feeling—that had happened, or that I had briefly noticed, during the course of the day, but which I could not quite lay finger on—something of which the impact had been oblique and that now tapped irritatingly, with an obscure persistent warning, at my mind. For a time, I tried vainly to recall it, whatever it had been, then gave it up.

I wandered, restively, into the "library" again and took out the volume of "Legends", despite a kind of contemptuous repugnance, to consider, more attentively, what it might have to say.

Presently I found the passage I wanted. It was in a long section entitled, simply, *Auvergne*, and its immediate context was rather mystifying—too occult or too rhapsodical in diction for me to follow clearly. Regretting the inadequacy of my French, I read on, puzzled. "... exceptional tenacity of life ... enabling the said nameless to withdraw vital force ..." (a line or two here that I could not make head nor tail of) "... so to rebuild itself around the mammet as around a nucleus of focus and ..." (again a string of unfamiliar words defeated me) "... or other homely object, so be it have the semblance of a man. But woe to all who do adventure thus, and whether child or woman, if the right fixative be not supplied ..." And then some sentences of what appeared to be a sort of general description:

"... their chief weakness being in the wrists and wattles. Yellow above all they joy in, and a certain tint of bluish grey they do defy, wherefore, in extirpating them . . ."

Disappointed at my stumbling translation, I rested the volume, open, on my knee, and pondered. In a sense, what I *had* managed to translate relieved me, because it seemed such arrant, puerile nonsense. Why yes, I thought, in a delighted welling of, as it were, half-hesitant astonished thankfulness, it *was* all nonsense. Sheer, utter nonsense, and I *could* laugh at it. How had I ever—my fleeting elation ebbed. But Denis—I remembered . . . Yes Denis . . . That was the trouble. "Nonsense" or no, my boy's plight was actual enough, and . . .

My host entered—suddenly and brusquely. Owing, ostensibly, to his continued indisposition, we had scarcely encountered for the last several days, and his face now wore a slight frown. "*Bonjour*," he greeted, peevishly. "I—I regret to see you so poorly entertained. You will hardly derive much profit, or even amusement I should think, from *that* . . ." To my amazement he swooped upon the volume and replaced it smartly in the shelves.

Really, M. Vaignon was very trying; and it was now, all in an instant, that, as the result of this comparatively trivial incident, I found myself having an outright, first-class row with him. No doubt, on each side, nerves were frayed to breaking point, and it had needed but this spark to set our tempers in a blaze.

I had stood up. "You might, *Monsieur*, at least have had the courtesy not to *snatch* from my very knees a book that I was actually reading . . .!"

He glared at me, out of eyes swimming with tears. "It is my book. It is *my* book," he repeated childishly, "and I shall do, as I believe you say, what I bloody well like with it! I am going to bloody-burn it. There *Monsieur*! Can you advance any argument against my bloody-burning my own property, including the entire château, if I see fit? And should anybody still insist on lingering—on *lingering* I say—in this so-charming château of mine *when* I burn it, he will be burnt too, neck and crop, along with it, unless . . ."

Staggering, he had clapped a hand to his breast. "Forgive me . . . I am desolated to have made such an exhibition of myself and caused you to think me like—like a stage-Frenchman, *n'est-ce pas*, but— but certain things in this establishment are not quite as they should be . . . A large—an infinitely large—bluebottle has got loose in my bedroom and kept me awake all night, and I, too, am as your *sans-noms*—weak in the wrist and wattles . . .!"

Was he going mad? Or shamming mad? "*My*" *sans-noms*! I was

really completely disgusted with him, the more so perhaps because he had somehow succeeded, in this ridiculous fashion, in taking the wind out of my sails.

"This creature of yours, whatever it is," I was startled to hear myself shouting, "this precious *sans-nom* of yours, I say, that has attacked my boy and that for some reason you'll tell me nothing more about—he died here, didn't he? Up in the tower room, or under it . . ."

M. Vaignon regarded me, at first uncomprehendingly and then almost as if pityingly. "My poor friend," he said slowly. "My poor friend—all this had been too much for you and—and, ha, ha, you are going crazy. *Mon dieu, c'est le comble, ça!*" He approached nearer, with a curious dancing step and, to my utter dumbfounding, snapped a finger and thumb beneath my nose. "I repeat it, *Monsieur*. I repeat, with inexpressible regret, that you are quite demented!"

I had backed from him, far too bewildered to feel insulted by the taunting words and gesture, and it was at this instant that, as at a previous, somewhat similar, crisis, the tall form of Dorlot filled the doorway.

"*Calmez-vous, mon maître,*" he remonstrated. "*Calmez-vous!* It is this heavy weather that surcharges the nerves, but to yield to your temperament in this manner and with these antics is unseemly. *Calmez-vous!* Thank heaven," he added in a lower tone, "it cannot last much longer now."

M. Vaignon looked at us wildly. "Forgive me," he murmured again, "forgive me . . ." A strange expression, a sort of leering, still half-impudent despair, flickered over his features as, turning, he let Dorlot lead him unsteadily away.

I stayed motionless where I was a full minute. The whole scene had been incredible, and bedlam had flowered, unashamed, before my eyes.

At length, dazedly, I walked from the house.

Outside, I recovered. That was, my immediate emotional disturbance gradually died down, but I felt exhausted, as if I had been through a fight or in a *mêlée*, and my fundamental apprehension and confusion were increased.

It is a nightmare, I thought, a nightmare. That is why everyone appears mad and why you yourself behave like a madman. All at once you will wake up—perhaps when Goderich comes . . .

The air, as Dorlot had observed, was close and muggy. It was mild, but with a treacherous intimation of tenseness—of I did not quite know what. The fields stretched round me passively—too passively I fancied oddly, as if conspiring, or abandoned, to a gathering sly enchantment. They rolled, in their meek rectangles of ochre, dun and beige,

up to unstirring foothills, dreaming a guileful dream. Crossing one of them, I remarked, idly, that the scarecrow I had noticed earlier from the *salon* window seemed to have altered its position slightly.

M. Vaignon . . . Good heavens! "*Sans-noms*" . . . His, if you please, not mine! I wished him joy of them! "*Sans-noms*"! Ye gods . . .! Who would invent such bogeys such farcically loathsome things, unless . . . I raised my eyes to the grey bated sky, and shivered. No, I was not, to word it temperately, much enamoured of this devil's nook, this baleful twelfth- or thirteenth-century pocket of provincial France, where superstitions and obscene mythologies, instead of just remaining paintily decorative, had the unpleasant trick of springing suddenly alive and driving mad all those who brooded on them overlong. If only . . .

My disjointed ruminations petered out. Once more I raised my eyes, with a faint shudder. All about me, as I walked, the hills, the waiting fields, kept quiet pace with me. I was aware—how shall I put it?—of a bland banking-up, of a demure stealth, a kind of tiptoe ripening of something . . . My head ached and I had an indescribably oppressive feeling. The château, from the spot where I had now come rather giddily to a halt, was visible, maybe a kilo off, but partially obscured by a dip and buy a thin belt of trees. I would get back to it as quickly as I could in case my disagreeable symptoms should increase.

Slowly, I proceeded, conscious, upon my mental palate, of some recrudescence of flavour that was dimly nauseous and half-familiar. I had covered perhaps a third of the distance to the château when a dog ran up behind me, whining. It was one of the three or four dogs of the house, an amiable enough little creature, mainly poodle, called Zizi. Denis had been fond of it, and I supposed it still companioned him in his present, gipsyish style of life. But now it appeared distressed or frightened and slunk whimpering and cringing at my heels.

We went on together, skirting a field of stubble. It was the field containing the useless scarecrow, and again, puzzled, I had the impression that the object had moved slightly, in the direction of the château. Hang it! I thought querulously in a sort of mildly annoyed perplexity, this was preposterous, and I must previously have misjudged the confounded thing's position. Zizi, beside me, cowered closer and gave, very low, a series of curious suppressed yelps.

The day had grown overcast and my headache was no better. I had a sense of something brewing, something "making"—a kind of dumbly guarded watchfulness and wakefulness—in the dull air, the trees, the hilltops and the whelming sky, as if they too were, like myself, alerted and upon some strange and semi-animate *qui-vive*. The dog, while

we passed opposite the middle of the field, darted for a moment from me and through the hedge, venting two stiff little barks, of actual terror or of a variety of canine scandal.

Gradually, as we neared the house, my head ached less, yet a conviction of uneasy imminence, a presentiment of swiftly gathering evil, knocked still at my mind's door, and again, more fervently, I longed for Goderich.

I entered the château, and there, on a tray in the hall, lay an answer to my prayer. Yes, said the telegraph, he could come on Tuesday, that was, in three days' time.

## 4

This heartening news was confirmed in a letter from him the next morning, explaining that he would have joined me instantly had not his partner been somewhat indisposed and hardly capable, till the promised Tuesday, of shouldering the extra work. Well, it was more than I had had the right to hope that my friend should have been able to arrange to get away at all, and, heaven knew, I blessed him.

During the week-end, however, my feeling of tension increased, and was appreciably heightened, as it happened, by my host's ill-humour. M. Vaignon, after our recent row, had offered me a somewhat grudging apology for his rudeness—but now he was exasperated again upon a different score. While I had had, from Goderich, a cheering and reassuring letter, *he* had received, it seemed, a violently upsetting one. The aunt, he told me, with whom *les petits* had been staying had written saying she was compelled to visit Tunisie on business, it might be for several months, and must accordingly send her brother-in-law's children home.

"It is an excuse!" he fumed. "'Business' . . . Pah! They *cannot* come here yet—not yet!"

My sympathy for him, when I remembered the plight of my own boy, was not excessive, and privily I blamed no aunt for getting sick of young Marcel and Augustine, but the matter set my mind running, with a revival of curiosity, on the connection (or in the case of Denis actual relationship) between our respective families, for it was through the sister of this same discredited and disobliging lady that it existed. She had been, before her marriage to M. Vaignon, a Mlle Drouard, and, by a common ancestor three generations back, a cousin (though I do not think they knew each other) of my wife's.

This train of thought led naturally to a reconsideration of the whole question of M. Vaignon's conduct and attitude throughout; and here I was as far as ever from a satisfactory conclusion. He had blown hot and cold and been, by turns, solicitous and callous, courteous and grossly impolite. He had been contrite enough (if it were that) to break off the "holiday exchange" arrangement, yet insufficiently honest to warn me, plainly, about Raoul. He had had the grace, later, to wire me twice after Denis had run away to France, but then, when I arrived for the retrieval of my truant, had given me no help. There was no making the man out . . .

I had been puzzling, alone, upon the Saturday evening, over these and allied problems when I heard a confused noise of angry shouting. The sounds seemed to come from the direction of the stables, suggesting by their volume and persistence that several persons, possibly a dozen or so, were engaged in a violent fracas. But by the time I had gone out to look, just as the hubbub had rather suddenly subsided, the disputants must evidently have stopped their fight, and scattered. Crossing the *basse cour*, however, I saw a man, limping painfully and holding a bloodstained rag to his face. I recognised him as a fellow I had noticed driving one of the wagons that carried hay, or milk and butter from the *laiterie*, and might have asked him what the trouble was had I not at that moment caught, from somewhere within, the shrilly furious tones of M. Vaignon.

As to this incident it was again from Dorlot that I received enlightenment, incomplete though it was. His master (who made no allusion to the matter) having retired immediately after dinner, he, Dorlot, brought me my customary glass of lonely brandy in the library and said: "That parcel of rascals from Saint Orvin were after Batiste and your boy this afternoon, and nearly had them too . . . !"

"What!" I exclaimed, alarmed. "After my boy? What for? Is he all right?"

The man replied, coldly, addressing the ceiling, it appeared, rather than me.

"The young *monsieur* is entirely unharmed since they were unable to catch him, but Batiste—that one, he certainly got a scratch or two . . ."

"But why—why should they be attacked?"

Dorlot shrugged, spreading his hands. People here, *Monsieur*, are superstitious. They are believers in all kinds of nonsense, and possibly the young *monsieur* had been doing something, quite inadvertently, which caused them to suspect him, *sans dire* most wrongfully, of dealing in—in such matters. I cannot tell . . . *Enfin*, the two of them, he and Batiste, were pursued by this band of ignoramuses and ruffians



into our very yard, where they found refuge. It is unfortunate", he added as if meditatively, "that certain, even, of our own servants, too, should take sides with this rabble . . . Enough—it is no longer my affair or properly my concern. I leave this place tomorrow . . ."

I was exceedingly disturbed, not only by Dorlot's story and its implications but also, if to a less degree, by his announcement of departure. It would have been foolish to regard him as an ally, yet he had not been actively hostile and latterly had constituted almost my only source of news concerning Denis.

As to the tale itself—more lay behind it, obviously, than Dorlot would disclose, but of this I could guess at a good deal. Amongst the peasantry Denis would not too naturally be a prime object of suspicion, and it was really a wonder he had evaded molestation (if he had) till now. The man Batiste, surmisably, had been his friend or his associate and fallen, consequently, under the same stigma . . . Evidently, the business had attained the proportions of a feud, and M. Vaignon's ranks, within the château, had been split. Dorlot, I fancied, would not lack company upon the train tomorrow . . .

While I was counting the hours to Goderich's arrival with a fresh sense of urgency I renewed, vainly, my efforts to lessen Denis's hostility. I no longer hoped, now, for a full reconciliation so speedily, but, short of that, I would have liked, before Goderich lent me what help he could, to be at all events on speaking terms with my own child.

Twice I tried to talk with him through his locked door, receiving on the first occasion no reply and on the second the response: "Oh, go away! I *hate* you!" And twice, also, I got within undignified hailing distance of him in the grounds, only to be humiliated by his almost offhandedly contemptuous flight. Obviously, at any time, I might probably have rallied M. Vaignon's odds and ends of still faithful retainers (a further couple had left with Dorlot in the morning!) to round up my quarry, and then forced him, as my prisoner, to parley—but such trappings or waylayings would have been very much against the grain and, as I saw it then, have done more harm than good.

What, I would wonder could be his view of the position? How, in his own opinion, was he faring? Pretty evidently he had expected, or at least hoped, to find his odious playmate here—and had not M. Vaignon told me that he, Denis, would do his best to get Raoul back? In that, however, so far as I could judge, he had been disappointed. What had become of the physical "Raoul"—of the physical "aspect" of him—I had no idea. Presumably, after my half-throttling of him, he had returned somehow to France, but had not yet (I trusted) reappeared in his old haunts. Upon this point I could have, to be sure,

no certainty, but, whoever or whatever the creature was, its headquarters seemed to lie on this side of the Channel, and the next step of minimum precaution was to transport Denis to the other.

Monday—and tomorrow Goderich would be here. Indeed, a letter for him, *aux soins de* M. Vaignon, had rather surprisingly preceded him already, arriving together with one for me from Jenny. The weather was still gloomy, rainless but boding, and again I strolled dejectedly around the nearer fields.

The landscape, as before, was sere and sullen, but its mood, to my imagining, had subtly changed. The sense of stealthy ferment and evil quickening had departed, and the drab acres had an empty look, as if delivered or relieved of something. Loth to accuse myself of being over-fanciful, I stared about me, seeking for anything that might account, more factually, for this impression, but could find nothing. Merely, the scarecrow I had noticed formerly had gone, having been removed and set up for whatever none too obvious reason, as I subsequently discovered, in another field considerably closer to the house.

I wandered slowly back to the château. Help was at last at hand—for Goderich should be here tomorrow evening—yet my heart was curiously unlightened. The countryside, luring and secret, with that discharged and voided aspect of an ominous fulfilment, seemed to wear a mien of hidden ridicule, of some kind of deceptive somnolence and inward mockery, as though it were laughing at me up its sleeve. Nonsense! I tried to think. What utter nonsense . . . ! With a derisive apt theatricality a trio of stage-property bats, encouraged by the dusk, skimmed past me as I turned by the corner of a barn.

And then, suddenly, I had a shock.

"Hello, Daddy . . ." said Denis.

He was there, in front of me, shyly smiling and addressing me in this form he had discarded for some years, as "babyish". His clothes were stained and torn and his cheeks wan under their grime. I did not believe he had washed properly for days.

But it was far less his ragamuffin air that horrified me than his manner. It was flat and almost bored, yet confident; casual and unconstrained in some utterly wrong way, as though he were so tired out with whatever he had been up to that he had forgotten, even, what it was. How could he, else, have carried it off with this weary, this to me actually hideous, aplomb? He stood, gazing at me in a sort of forlorn and rather vacant friendliness, as if nothing had happened, as if he were completely unconscious of my misery, or his own.

"Come in," I think I said to him. "And—and talk things over, shall we . . . ?"

"Yes . . ." he replied absently. "All right. I'm hungry too." He

paused, then added, reconsideringly and as a careful qualification, "That is, you know, not really *very* . . ."

We had begun to walk on, from the barn and the fading light shone, briefly, on his face, discovering there a look that sickened me but is not easy to describe. It was at once wily and exhausted, an expression so to speak of supreme irrelevance or imperviousness to the situation, of a precocious unconcern and hard frivolity or falsity—a falsity all the worse for being undeliberate and still childish. My gorge rose as at something odious. Rage filled me and, to my dismay, I found my fist clenched to strike him. It was with the greatest effort that I controlled the impulse.

"Denis . . ." I heard myself saying "*Denis . . . !*" My anger had turned suddenly to yearning and I had him, unresisting, in my arms. He was light as a feather, limply yielding, and weighing nothing, almost nothing. I felt, while I strained him to me, as if he were liable at any instant to melt away from my embrace into thin air.

At the château, when he entered, M. Vaignon had just come into the hall, gaping at us as though quite confounded.

I do not really know how the next few hours passed, what words were said or what was done in them. I do know and remember that they were not happy or triumphant hours—alas, far from that. A deep emotional conviction of impending sorrow or calamity persisted and I could not banish it. Superficially, it was to the good that the pursuits, the trappings and lassoings I had envisaged were dispensed with—yet what had I instead! *Not* Denis. That was the trouble. It was only the curious shell of him I had. He was a wanling, almost a changeling—something that most horribly denied each trait and feature of the Denis I recalled, and of which the contemplation could but be agonising.

None the less, as I say, this unexpected turn of events was a practical simplification. Presumably, Denis would "come quietly" and not have to be dragged home a prisoner. Goderich, when he arrived, would have nothing to do but go back with us again. And then . . . ?"

"Are you tired?" I believe I asked once, "after all the— the camping-out . . . ?"

He regarded me queerly, head cocked, with the suspicious, quasi-intelligent incomprehension, the notion visited me dreadfully, of a parrot. "A—a little. Yes, a little . . ."

That was all; but the manner if not the matter of the reply had remained vaguely hostile—and violently unsatisfactory. His tone held a deplorable sort of cunning, or a fancied cunning—as if, despite his sudden yielding, he still had an ace hidden somewhere in the pack, or thought he had.

What had prompted his surrender? Had he merely wearied of roughing it and craved the ordinary home comforts he had missed, now, for three weeks? Had his designs, whatever was their nature, been frustrated, or miscarried, so that at last he had had to give them up? Or had he, possibly, decided that my reinforcement by Goderich (of whose coming, apart from servants' gossip, he could have got wind in any case from the letter in the hall) would be too much for him and that he might as well cave in to me right away?

I must wait to find out all that, for the time was not propitious yet, I felt, for direct catechisings. Fortunately, perhaps, for that evening at any rate this question did not arise, as Denis professed himself so drowsy that, as soon he had had his tea, and then a bath, he went to bed.

Of M. Vaignon, save for his startled apparition in the hail, I had seen nothing since lunch. I dined alone and, after a couple of pipes in the *petit salon*, was glad to get up to my room.

Denis and I, I reflected, had forgotten, or at least—perhaps on both sides semi-deliberately—omitted to say good night to each other. I wondered whether he was yet awake, or (if his sleep were half as troubled as I feared like in his father's case) what dreams would visit him.

Next day, I was in two minds about taking Denis with me to the station to meet Goderich, deciding finally against it. I did not think he would slip off again, and if he did it would only prove his capitulation no real capitulation after all. As to that, indeed, I still felt something disquietingly planned or spurious in it; but my misgivings did not include, now, any apprehensions of his renewed and literal bolting.

Nothing much had happened during the morning. M. Vaignon, encountering me just before lunch, congratulated me, with a deathly simper, on my improved *entente* with Denis and made no difficulties over lending me the car, which I was mightily relieved he did not propose to drive, this time, himself. Goderich would stay one night at the château, and tomorrow the three of us would return to England.

I pictured my friend's surprise when he learned of the fresh development. In a sense he would have had his journey for nothing, but I didn't think he would mind that. A wire yesterday evening might just have caught and stopped him, but, actually, Denis's unexpected "surrender" had put everything else out of my head, and I was selfishly glad, now, that it had.

At the station, I had still ten minutes to wait, and outside the yard entrance to the baggage-office I noticed a wagon drawn up, and a

long box being unloaded from it and then carried in to the clerk. The wagon I could recognise as from the château, and the fellow awkwardly shouldering the box was, I was pretty sure, that same "Batiste" I had seen limping, with the blood-stained kerchief to his face, in the *basse cour* two days ago. As he climbed again into his seat, the *chef de gare* himself came out to confer for a few moments with him in an under-tone.

But here at last was Goderich's train. It had scarcely clanked puffing to a standstill before he leaped out and clasped my hand in his.

"Well," he was saying, "it's rather like one's toothache fleeing on the dentist's doorstep. If I hadn't "Come for nothing", as you are so kind as to suggest, you and your young jackanapes would probably still be at loggerheads."

We were approaching the château, and I wondered. Goderich's hearty vigour, his very tone of cheerful lightness, was a gust of health and hope from another world—and yet, I doubted, and was even, somehow, shocked.

"If we're *not* still at loggerheads, as it is," I remember answering. "You'll see for yourself presently."

We drove under the *porte-cochère*, and alighted. M. Vaignon was there to greet us, all politeness. A small, dim figure hung back, hugging the shadows.

"Hello, scallywag!" called Goderich. "Hi, come out of that!"

Denis moved forwards undecidedly. His face, again, horrified me by its hollow wanness.

"M . . ." Goderich commented. "Not altogether a walking advertisement of anything I must say. That's the deserts of being A.W.O.L . . . . Nineteen days adrift, eh? But we won't clap him in the glass-house this time, sergeant-major . . ."

Once more, I gave a mental gasp. I did not know whether to admire or be scared out of my wits by Goderich's breeziness. Wasn't it, I misdoubted, a trifle overdone? It jolted me, I think, not so much through a fear of its effect on Denis as by appearing almost *too* temerarious a defiance of the evil gods.

But Denis did not seem to mind this "joshing". He even smiled faintly, as Goderich persevered with his hardy badinage, and ate, under the friendly bombardment, a reasonably good tea.

None the less, I could divine, beneath his fun-poking, that Goderich was concerned. When Denis had gone off, "to see the horses fed" he said, with Zizi, my friend's expression became grave.

"What do you make of this, Habgood?" he surprised me by inquiring.

"I . . . ? Why, I-I want *you* to tell *me*!"

"Of course. But first I'd be interested in your opinions, so far as you have any. Do you, for instance, really—" He broke off: "Wait a bit. Are we likely to be disturbed here? Our perfect host isn't liable to butt in, is he?"

"I shouldn't think so. He's completely haywire these days, and we probably won't see him again this evening."

"Suits me . . . And if—"

But at this moment, to falsify my prophecy, M. Vaignon *did* "butt in", insisting upon "entertaining" us, with the most oddly vapid small talk, until and throughout dinner; and it was only when he had at length proffered his excuses and retired that I and Goderich could continue our discussion. Denis himself, as on the previous night, had gone early to his bed.

"Well," Goderich resumed, "what is your feeling, about the whole thing now? For example—and putting a conceivable crack-brained "impersonation" out of it, as I think we may—do you actually believe that the pernicious loon we both knew down in Hampshire is the same Privache whose grave, you've said, you saw near here last week?"

"It—it certainly *sounds* nonsense," I replied.

"Nonsense"—yes, naturally it does. But even nonsense can be dynamic. In its proper realm, where its writ runs and it holds sway, it *isn't* nonsense. And it can, often, effectually intrude into a sphere beyond its own. It has become at least *mentally* real for Denis, and also, up to a point, for you. I just wanted to know how real."

"I tell you, I don't know. It simply doesn't add up."

"All right. It doesn't. If it *did*, for instance, this damned sallydore could eventually be traced, and be run-in for something. But for what, exactly? In what terms could you prefer a charge? I'd hate to see you trying! The notion would be quite absurd—which just shows you that it *can't* "add up" for us in any ordinary way. But the next obvious practical step anyhow is to get your boy as clear of it all as we can and pray that later he'll—well, respond to treatment."

"But what do *you* think, honestly? Is . . . ?" I faltered.

"I know what you're going to ask. Well, *is* it? Or again, *is* it? How can *I* tell? It was *there*, that precious gaby was, and it appeared to be more or less passably a man—and, for some revolting reason, it wore mittens. Also, it had an arm which acted up pretty unorthodoxly . . . What I *don't* see is how a mere throttling, a semi-throttling, could have snuffed it out and kiboshed it, at all events temporarily, as it seems to have done . . . No doubt, that rubbed in the fact that it wasn't too popular, and would be a deterrent to some extent, but . . ."

Goderich, too, hesitated; then went on: "I don't fancy we can get much forrarder along those lines. It's easy enough to say the whole thing's farcical—and if you could *feel* that as well as say it, it would be fine. What about the "poltergeist" noises? Do they still go on?"

"I was told so. I've not heard them here myself."

'And the "haunted" room, where you're persuaded the original fee-faw-fum demised. How does that come into it? Did our host admit definitely that Privache No. 1 *had* died there?'

"'Definitely' . . . ! No indeed. He's never said anything definite or straightforward. When I did as it were challenge him to deny that the—the first Privache had died where I felt he had, he just behaved quite weirdly, was abominably rude, and accused *me* of going mad . . ."

For some while longer our talk continued without leading us to any more concrete conclusion than we had reached already—that our sole hope for Denis lay in getting him away immediately and that, when this was done, it would be only in the nick of time.

We had thought, Goderich and I, that we were bringing Denis home, and that morning we treated our precious freight as if no precaution for its safety could be excessive. Denis was, actually and in literal truth so worn and wasted that such an attitude would have been natural in any case, and I think we both felt that, unless the greatest care were exercised, he might as it were collapse in our hands or be blown away by a puff. His eyes were lustreless and his skin dry, and his manner held some ingredient I could not define, at once apathetic and expectant, or perhaps apprehensive.

The day had broken cloudily after, for me, a restless night. I had had dreams, but could not recall them clearly. Mostly, they had been of absurdities—of M. Vaignon addressing a meeting of puppets in the library, of Dorlot roller-skating somewhere overhead, and even of the ridiculous scarecrow, shifting from field to field in a continued march towards the house—but their persisting savour was oppressive, and I had woken from them with nerves jangled.

Our train was to leave Foant at about ten-thirty, and we had risen, we realised, rather unnecessarily early. Denis, glancing at us distraitly from under lowered brows, ate an extremely sketchy breakfast. Once, he appeared lost in a kind of reverie, and then, arousing from it with a start, upset his chocolate bowl. The slight mishap caused him to open his mouth, aghastly, in an unuttered scream.

This time, we wouldn't need our host's car. I had arranged, yesterday, for a taxi to come out for us from Foant, and now I prayed it might be punctual. Our luggage was stacked in the hall; I had tipped the servants, and M. Vaignon, dressing-gowned, had made a grisly

mountebank descent to say goodbye. Bowing, and stiffly shaking hands, he muttered something else that sounded like: "... if it will let you . . ."

At last the three of us drove off. For a while, my spirits lightened and I breathed more freely.

"Are you all right?" I asked Denis.

"Oh yes . . ."

He was next me and facing Goderich, gazing dreamily—or raptly—out of the window. His expression was remote, as though he were attending to something we could not see, or not appreciate. His hair, I noticed, had grown long and wanted cutting.

Suddenly, from under his seat, issued a low bark. Zizi! How he had managed it I did not know, but the little creature must have leaped in after Denis, and we should now have to ask the station-master to restore him to his owner.

This, on alighting from the taxi, we did, and presently the train drew in. Denis, for a second or two as Goderich and I were about to board it, was not to be found, and my heart froze. But next moment he came scurrying from the direction of the *consigne* and clambered in with us just in time.

I was so thankful at retrieving him! A passion of yearning sympathy for my poor darling rose in me, and I pressed his arm. The train gathered speed and I remember sighing in relief and thinking that every mile now was a mile further towards his safety. Actually, I had hardly expected or quite dared to hope we *would* ever do it—ever get away. I had feared, all the while, that something—though I couldn't guess how or what—would happen or put out a hand to halt us or detain us—some sort of accident or hitch—and . . .

But my satisfaction ebbed, and died. Denis's manner suddenly alarmed me. He was distressed, I could not tell why. "The—the scare—" He seemed to be trying, unsuccessfully, to say something; then, changing to French, at length got out: "... *l'épouvantail, c'est dans . . .*" He paused, and added, with an urgency I could not understand, the one word: "Zizi . . ."

Sure enough, to my annoyed confusion, the dog was there, and with us still, whether or not with Denis's abetting I did not know. But it was not the dog's presence I was bothered over: it was the curious looks and bearing of my boy.

Another train, which must be an express, was overtaking us, coming up rapidly upon a parallel track. Our own train, as if inspired to a race, increased its speed, and the express gained on us less swiftly. Zizi had burst in upon us, at first delightedly, from the corridor, wagging his tail, but now appeared strangely subdued. With a short bark



of half-hearted challenge he slunk cowering under the seat, by Denis.

"What is it, Denis? What's the matter?" I implored.

Goderich had pulled out a brandy flask and held it to Denis's lips. They moved slowly and bewilderedly. "*l'épouvantail . . . The—the scarecrow . . . c'est . . .*"

Suddenly he broke from us, moaning, and dashed into the corridor. Both I and Goderich had grabbed at him, ineffectually. The dog, as though torn between its fear and a kind of loyalty, had emerged from under the seat and stood whimpering in the doorway.

Thrusting it aside with my boot, I followed Denis. The express was quickly overhauling us. I could just see, at the moment, the front of its locomotive showing level with the corridor's end, then creeping foot by foot along our windows.

"Denis, Denis!" I repeated. "What is it? What are you *doing*?"

He was hunched oddly, staring out at the other train with a quite indescribable look of terror on his face. His eyes were round with fright and his body was pressed desperately against the corridor's inner wall as if, despite his fascinated interest, he were trying to get as far from the pursuing coaches as he could.

What followed has an *outré* horror and grotesqueness which puts such a strain on ordinary credence that even I who witnessed it still find it hard if not impossible at times to reconcile with, or accept as, "literal" truth. I cannot, in any way, explain it, but I believe, now, that something, then, went hideously wrong—went wrong from Denis's and Raoul's point of view, I mean—and that whatever sort of ghastly schemes and machinations may have been afoot were, at the last moment, bungled. What I did see, or what at all events I seemed to see, was the result, I feel, of some bizarre and odious miscarriage . . .

I had caught Denis's arm, and shook it, but he paid no attention to me. Two men, on the farther side of him, stuck curious heads out of their compartment, and gaped foolishly at us. Behind me, squeezed up in the narrow passage, Goderich was shouting over my shoulder, above the uproar of the trains: "Come on, young man, snap out of it! Come back!" His voice was cool, but he added, in my ear: "For heaven's sake get hold of him somehow!"

Denis had wedged himself against the jamb of a half-open door, and it was now, as I was struggling, in the cramped space, to wrest him from it, that our own pace abruptly slackened, so that the express began to flash by our windows at a rush. I learned later that it was then that Goderich had pulled the communication cord. Meanwhile I still could not drag Denis free. I was aware that he was in some awful danger but tugged at him in vain. As in a nightmare, I strained

till the sweat stood on my forehead, praying that the dream would break.

It never did, or has. For an instant I had looked out of the window. The guard's van of the express was just passing us. Something, a long box like a coffin, cocked lewdly up and protruded slowly from it, flew out of it towards us. The corridor was littered with shivered glass.

The train had stopped with a violent jolt. People were running along the track, and already I caught, from somewhere, amazed exclamations: "*Un épouvantail . . . !* It was, in that box there, solely a scarecrow . . . !"

I turned again to Denis, thinking I heard his call. "Zizi . . ." I fancied he had said. But what had happened to the dog I did not, then or later, know or care.

My boy's face was seamed and wizened as that of an old man, and the starkest terror was graven on it. His body now was quite limp in my hands.

Goderich and I carried him back to the compartment and laid him on a seat, and it was then I saw that, before his last cry, his hair, which had changed to elf-locks, had gone white.

## LUCIUS SHEPARD

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### How the Wind Spoke at Madaket

*Lucius Shepard burst onto the science fiction scene during 1984. If you looked the other way you'd have missed his first appearance in print, 'Solitario's Eyes' (1983) but by the end of 1984 if you were involved anywhere in the fields of fantasy and science fiction, you couldn't have avoided stumbling over him. The product of one of the legendary Clarion Writers Workshops (summer of 1980), Shepard, now in his early forties, regularly finds his stories nominated for the top awards and almost as regularly winning them. He received the John. W. Campbell Award as best new writer in 1985, and received the Nebula Award for 'R&R' as Best Novella of 1986. But don't let all these science fiction titles fool you. Lucius Shepard is every bit as strong and exciting in the fields of fantasy and horror. He first came to my attention with a wonder-filled fantasy set in Nepal, 'The Night of White Bhairab' (1984) followed closely by the memorable 'The Man Who Painted the Dragon Graille' (1984). One would do well to seek out his recent collection The Jaguar Hunter (1987) for more examples of his potency. In the meantime, here is his most powerful short horror novel to date.*

## 1

*Softly at dawn, rustling dead leaves in the roof gutters, ticking the wires of the television antenna against the shingled wall, seething through the beach grasses, shifting the bare twigs of a hawthorn to claw at the toolshed door, playfully flipping a peg off the clothesline, snuffling the garbage and tattering the plastic bags, creating a thousand nervous flutters, a thousand more shivery whispers, then building, keening in the window cracks and rattling the panes, smacking down a sheet of plyboard that has been leaning against the woodpile, swelling to a pour off the open sea, its howl articulated by throats streets and teeth of vacant houses, until you begin to imagine a huge invisible animal throwing back its head and roaring, and the cottage is creaking like the timbers of an old ship...*

## 2

Waking at first light, Peter Ramey lay abed a while and listened to the wind; then, steeling himself against the cold, he threw off the covers, hurriedly pulled on jeans, tennis shoes, and a flannel shirt, and went into the front room to kindle a fire in the wood stove. Outside, the trees were silhouetted by a backdrop of slate clouds, but the sky wasn't yet bright enough to cast the shadow of the window frame across the picnic-style table beneath it the other furniture—three chewed-up wicker chairs and a sofa bunk—hunched in their dark corners. The tinder caught, and soon the fire was snapping inside the stove. Still cold, Peter beat his arms against his shoulders and hopped from one foot to another, setting dishes and drawers to rattling. He was a pale, heavyset man of thirty-three, with ragged black hair and beard, so tall that he had to duck through the doors of the cottage; and because of his size he had never really settled into the place: he felt like a tramp who had appropriated a child's abandoned treehouse in which to spend the winter.

The kitchen was an alcove off the front room, and after easing the chill, his face stinging with heat, he lit the gas stove and started breakfast. He cut a hole in a slice of bread, laid it in the frying pan, then cracked an egg and poured it into the hole (usually he just opened cans and cereal boxes or heated frozen food, but Sara Tapping, his current lover, had taught him to fix eggs this way, and it made him feel like a competent bachelor to keep up the practice). He shoveled

down the egg and bread standing at the kitchen window, watching the gray-shingled houses across the street melt from the darkness, shadowy clumps resolving into thickets of bayberry and sheep's laurel, a picket-line of Japanese pines beyond them. The wind had dropped and it looked as if the clouds were going to hang around, which was fine by Peter. Since renting the cottage in Madaket eight months before, he had learned that he thrived on bleakness, that the blustery, overcast days nourished his imagination. He had finished one novel here, and he planned to stay until the second was done. And maybe a third. What the hell? There wasn't much point in returning to California. He turned on the water to do the dishes, but the thought of LA had soured him on being competent. Screw it! Let the ants breed. He pulled on a sweater, stuffed a notebook in his pocket, and stepped out into the cold.

As if it had been waiting for him, a blast of wind came swerving around the corner of the cottage and numbed his face. He tucked his chin onto his chest and set out walking, turning left on Tennessee Avenue and heading toward Smith Point, past more gray-shingled houses with quarterboards bearing cutesy names above their doors: names like Sea Shanty and Tooth Acres (the vacation home of a New Jersey dentist). When he had arrived on Nantucket he'd been amused by the fact that almost every structure on the island, even the Sears Roebuck store, had gray shingles, and he had written his ex-wife a long, humorous, let's-be-friends letter telling about the shingles, about all the odd characters and quirkiness of the place. His ex-wife had not answered, and Peter couldn't blame her, not after what he had done. Solitude was the reason he gave for having moved to Madaket, but while this was superficially true, it would have been more accurate to say that he had been fleeing the ruins of his life. He had been idling along, content with his marriage, churning out scripts for a PBS children's show, when he had fallen obsessively in love with another woman, herself married. Plans and promises had been made, as a result of which he had left his wife; but then, in a sudden reversal of form, the woman—who had never expressed any sentiment other than boredom and resentment concerning her husband—had decided to honor her vows, leaving Peter alone and feeling both a damned fool and a villain. Desperate, he had fought for her, failed, tried to hate her, failed, and finally, hoping a change of geography would provoke a change of heart—hers or his—he had come to Madaket. That had been in September, directly after the exodus of the summer tourists; it was now May, and though the cold weather still lingered, the tourists were beginning to filter back. But no hearts had changed.

Twenty minutes of brisk walking brought him to the top of a dune

overlooking Smith Point, a jut of sand extending a hundred yards or so into the water, with three small islands strung out beyond it; the nearest of these had been separated from the point during a hurricane, and had it still been attached, it—in conjunction with Eel Point, some three quarters of a mile distant—would have given the western end of the island the shape of a crab's claw. Far out at sea a ray of sunlight pierced the overcast and dazzled the water beneath to such brilliance that it looked like a laving of fresh white paint. Seagulls made curving flights overhead, hovered and dropped scallops onto the gravelly shingle to break the shells, then swooped down to pluck the meat. Sad-vowelled gusts of wind sprayed a fine grit through the air.

Peter sat in the lee of a dune, choosing a spot from which he could see the ocean between stalks of the pale green beach grass, and opened his notebook. The words **HOW THE WIND SPOKE AT MADAKET** were printed on the inside cover. He had no illusions that the publishers would keep the title; they would change it to *The Keening* or *The Huffing and Puffing*, package it with a garish cover and stick it next to *Love's Tormenting Itch* by Wanda LaFontaine on the grocery store racks. But none of that mattered as long as the words were good, and they were, though it hadn't gone well at first, not until he had started walking each morning to Smith Point and writing long-hand. Then everything had snapped into focus. He had realized that it was *his* story he wanted to tell—the woman, his loneliness, his psychic flashes, the resolution of his character—all wrapped in the eerie metaphor of the wind; the writing had flowed so easily that it seemed the wind was collaborating on the book, whispering in his ear and guiding his hand across the page. He flipped the pages and noticed a paragraph that was a bit too formal, that he should break up and seed throughout the story:

*"Sadler had spent much of his life in Los Angeles, where the sounds of nature were obscured, and to his mind the constancy of the wind was Nantucket's most remarkable feature. Morning, noon and night it flowed across the island, giving him a sense of being a bottom-dweller in an ocean of air, buffeted by currents that sprang from exotic quarters of the globe. He was a lonely soul, and the wind served to articulate his loneliness, to point up the immensity of the world in which he had become isolated; over the months he had come to feel an affinity with it, to consider it a fellow-traveler through emptiness and time. He half-believed its vague, speechlike utterances to be exactly that—an oracular voice whose powers of speech were not yet fully developed—and from listening to them he*

*derived an impression of impending strangeness. He did not discount the impression, because as far as he could recall he had received similar ones, and most had been borne out by reality. It was no great prophetic gift, no foreshadowings of earthquakes or assassinations; rather, it was a low-grade psychic ability: flashes of vision often accompanied by queasiness and headaches. Sometimes he could touch an object and know something about its owner, sometimes he would glimpse the shape of an upcoming event. But these premonitions were never clear enough to do him any good, to prevent broken arms or—as he had lately discovered—emotional disaster. Still, he hearkened to them. And now he thought the wind might actually be trying to tell him something of his future, of a new factor about to complicate his existence, for whenever he staked himself out on the dune at Smith Point he would feel...*

Gooseflesh pebbling his skin, nausea, an eddying sensation behind his forehead as if his thoughts were spinning out of control. Peter rested his head on his knees and took deep breaths until the spell had abated. It was happening more and more often, and while it was most likely a product of suggestibility, a side-effect of writing such a personal story, he couldn't shake the notion that he had become involved in some Twilight Zone irony, that the story was coming true as he wrote it. He hoped not; it wasn't going to be a very pleasant story. When the last of his nausea had passed, he took out a blue felt-tip, turned to a clean page and began to detail the unpleasantness.

Two hours and fifteen pages later, hands stiff with cold, he heard a voice hailing him. Sara Tappinger was struggling up the side of the dune from the blacktop, slipping in the soft sand. She was, he thought with a degree of self-satisfaction, a damned pretty woman. Thirtyish; long auburn hair and nice cheekbones; endowed with what one of Peter's islander acquaintances called "big chest problems." That same acquaintance had congratulated him for having scored with Sara, saying that she'd blue-balled half the men on the island after her divorce, and wasn't he the lucky son of a bitch. Peter supposed he *was*: Sara was witty, bright, independent (she ran the local Montessori school), and they were compatible in every way. Yet it was not a towering passion. It was friendly, comfortable, and this Peter found alarming. Although being with her only glossed over his loneliness, he had come to depend on the relationship, and he was concerned that this signalled an overall reduction of his expectations, and that this in turn signalled the onset of middle-age, a state for which he was unprepared.

"Hi," she said, flinging herself down beside him and planting a

kiss on his cheek. "Wanna play?"

"Why aren't you in school?"

"It's Friday. I told you, remember? Parent-teacher conferences." She took his hand. "You're cold as ice! How long have you been here?"

"Couple of hours."

"You're insane." She laughed, delighted by his insanity. "I was watching you for a bit before I called. With your hair flying about, you looked like a mad Bolshevik hatching a plot."

"Actually," he said, adopting a Russian accent, "I come here to make contact with our submarines."

"Oh? What's up? An invasion?"

"Not exactly. You see, in Russia we have many shortages. Grain, high technology, blue jeans. But the Russian soul can fly above such hardships. There is, however, a shortage of one commodity that we must solve immediately, and this is why I have lured you here."

She pretended bewilderment. "You need school administrators?"

"No, no. It is more serious. I believe the American word for it is..." He caught her by the shoulders and pushed her down on the sand, pinning her beneath him. "Poontang. We cannot do without."

Her smile faltered, then faded to a look of rapt anticipation. He kissed her. Through her coat he felt the softness of her breasts. The wind ruffled his hair, and he had the idea that it was leaning over his shoulder, spying on them; he broke off the kiss. He was queasy again. Dizzy.

"You're sweating," she said, dabbing at his brow with a gloved hand. "Is this one of those spells?"

He nodded and lay back against the dune.

"What do you see?" She continued to pat his brow dry, a concerned frown etching delicate lines at the corners of her mouth.

"Nothing," he said.

But he did see something. Something glinting behind a cloudy surface. Something that attracted him yet frightened him at the same time. Something he knew would soon fall to his hand.

Though nobody realized it at the time, the first sign of trouble was the disappearance of Ellen Borchard, age thirteen, on the evening of Tuesday, May nineteenth—an event Peter had written into his book just prior to Sara's visit on Friday morning; but it didn't really begin for him until Friday night while drinking at the Atlantic Cafe in the village of Nantucket. He had gone there with Sara for dinner, and since the restaurant section was filled to capacity, they had opted for drinks and sandwiches at the bar. They had hardly settled on their



stool when Jerry Highsmith—a blond young man who conducted bicycle tours of the island (“...the self-proclaimed Hunk of Hunks,” was Sara’s description of him)—latched onto Peter; he was a regular at the cafe and an aspiring writer, and he took every opportunity to get Peter’s advice. As always Peter offered encouragement, but he secretly felt that anyone who liked to do their drinking at the Atlantic could have little to say to the reading public: it was a typical New England tourist trap, decorated with brass barometers and old life preservers, and it catered to the young summer crowd, many of whom—evident by their Bahama tans—were packed around the bar. Soon Jerry moved off in pursuit of a redhead with a honeysuckle drawl, a member of his latest tour group, and his stool was taken by Mills Lindstrom, a retired fisherman and a neighbor of Peter’s.

“Damn wind out there’s sharp enough to carve bone,” said Mills by way of a greeting, and ordered a whiskey. He was a big red-faced man stuffed into overalls and a Levi jacket; white curls spilled from under his cap, and a lacing of broken blood vessels webbed his cheeks. The lacing was more prominent than usual, because Mills had a load on.

“What are you doing here?” Peter was surprised that Mills would set foot in the cafe; it was in his conviction that tourism was a deadly pollution, and places like the Atlantic were its mutant growths.

“Took the boat out today. First time in two months.” Mills knocked back half his whiskey. “Thought I might set a few lines, but then I run into that thing off Smith Point. Didn’t feel like fishin’ anymore.” He emptied his glass and signalled for a refill. “Carl Keating told me it was *formin’ out there a while back*. Guess it slipped my mind.”

“What thing?” asked Peter.

Mills sipped at his second whiskey. “Off-shore pollution aggregate,” he said grimly. “That’s the fancy name, but basically it’s a garbage dump. Must be pretty near a kilometer square of water covered in garbage. Oil slick, plastic bottles, driftwood. They collect at slack points in the tides, but not usually so close to land. This one ain’t more’n fifteen miles off the point.”

Peter was intrigued. “You’re talking about something like the Sargasso Sea, right?”

“Spose so. ‘Cept these ain’t so big and there ain’t no seaweed.”

“Are they permanent?”

“This one’s new, the one off Smith Point. But there’s one about thirty miles off the Vineyard that’s been there for some years. Big storm’ll break it up, but it’ll always come back.” Mills patted his pockets, trying unsuccessfully to find his pipe. “Ocean’s gettin’ like a stagnant pond. Gettin’ to where a man throws in a line and more’n

likely he'll come up with an ol' boot 'stead of a fish. I 'member twenty years ago when the mackerel was runnin', there'd be so many fish the water would look black for miles. Now you spot a patch of dark water and you know some damn tanker's taken a shit!"

Sara, who had been talking to a friend, put her arm around Peter's shoulder and asked what was up; after Peter had explained she gave a dramatic shudder and said, "It sounds spooky to me." She affected a sepulchral tone. "Strange magnetic zones that lure sailors to their dooms."

"Spooky!" Mills scoffed. "You got better sense than that, Sara, Spooky!" The more he considered the comment, the madder he became. He stood and made a flailing gesture that spilled the drink of a tanned college-age kid behind him; he ignored the kid's complaint and glared at Sara. "Maybe you think this place is spooky. It's the same damn thing! A garbage dump! 'Cept here the garbage walks and talks"—he turned his glare on the kid—"and thinks it owns the goddamn world!"

"Shit," said Peter, watching Mills shoulder his way through the crowd. "I was going to ask him to take me to see it."

"Ask him tomorrow," said Sara. "Though I don't know why you'd want to see it," She grinned and held up her hands to ward off his explanation. "Sorry. I should realize that anyone who'll spend all day staring at seagulls would find a square kilometer of garbage downright erotic."

He made a grab for her breasts. "I'll show you erotic!"

She laughed and caught his hand and—her mood suddenly altered—brushed the knuckles against his lips. "Show me later," she said.

They had a few more drinks, talked about Peter's work, about Sara's, and discussed the idea of taking a weekend together in New York. Peter began to acquire a glow. It was partly the drinks, yet he realized that Sara, too, was responsible. Though there had been other women since he had left his wife, he had scarcely noticed them; he had tried to be honest with them, had explained that he was in love with someone else but he had learned that this was simply a sly form of dishonesty, that when you went to bed with someone—no matter how frank you had been as to your emotional state—they would refuse to believe there was any impediment to commitment that their love could not overcome; and so, in effect, he had used those women. But he did notice Sara, he did appreciate her, and he had not told her about the woman back in L.A.: once he had thought this a lie, but now he was beginning to suspect it was a sign that the passion was over. He had been in love for such a long time with a woman absent from him that perhaps he had grown to believe absence was

a precondition for intensity, and perhaps it was causing him to overlook the birth of a far more realistic yet equally intense passion closer at hand. He studied Sara's face as she rambled on about New York. Beautiful. The kind of beauty that sneaks up on you, that you assumed was mere prettiness. But then, noticing her mouth was a bit too full, you decided that she was interestingly pretty; and then, noticing the energy of the face, how her eyes widened when she talked, how expressive her mouth was, you were led feature by feature to a perception of her beauty. Oh, he noticed her all right. The trouble was that during those months of loneliness (*Months? Christ, it had been over a year!*) he had become distanced from his emotions; he had set up surveillance systems inside his soul, and every time he started to twitch one way or the other, instead of completing the action he analyzed it and thus aborted it. He doubted he would ever be able to lose himself again.

Sara glanced questioningly at someone behind him. Hugh Weldon, the chief of police. He nodded at them and settled onto the stool. "Sara," he said. "Mr. Ramey. Glad I caught you."

Weldon always struck Peter as the archetypal New Englander. Gaunt; weatherbeaten; dour. His basic expression was so bleak you assumed his gray crewcut to have been an act of penance. He was in his fifties but had a habit of sucking at his teeth that made him seem ten years older. Usually Peter found him amusing; however, on this occasion he experienced nausea and a sense of unease, feelings he recognized as the onset of a premonitory spell.

After exchanging pleasantries with Sara, Weldon turned to Peter. "Don't want you to go takin' this wrong, Mr. Ramey. But I got to ask where you were last Tuesday evenin' 'round six o'clock."

The feelings were growing stronger, evolving into a sluggish panic that roiled inside Peter like the effects of a bad drug. "Tuesday," he said. "That's when the Borchard girl disappeared."

"My God, Hugh," said Sara testily. "What is this? Roust out the bearded stranger every time somebody's kid runs away? You know damn well that's what Ellen did. I'd run away myself if Ethan Borchard was my father."

"Mebbe." Weldon favored Peter with a neutral stare. "Did you happen to see Ellen last Tuesday, Mr. Ramey?"

"I was home," said Peter, barely able to speak. Sweat was popping out on his forehead, all over his body, and he knew he must look as guilty as hell; but that didn't matter, because he could almost see what was going to happen. He was sitting somewhere, and just out of reach below him something glinted.

"Then you musta seen her," said Weldon. "Cordin' to witnesses

she was mopin' 'round your woodpile for pretty near an hour. Wearin' bright yellow. Be hard to miss that."

"No," said Peter. He was reaching for that glint, and he knew it was going to be bad in any case, very bad, but it would be even worse if he touched it and he couldn't stop himself.

"Now that don't make sense," said Weldon from a long way off. "That cottage of yours is so small, it 'pears to me a man would just naturally catch sight of somethin' like a girl standin' by his woodpile while he was movin' 'round. Six o'clock's dinnertime for most folks, and you got a nice view of the woodpile out your kitchen window."

"I didn't see her." The spell was starting to fade, and Peter was terribly dizzy.

"Don't see how that's possible." Weldon sucked at his teeth, and the glutinous sound caused Peter's stomach to do a show flip-flop.

"You ever stop to think, Hugh," said Sara angrily, "that maybe he was otherwise occupied?"

"You know somethin', Sara, why don't you say it plain?"

"I was with him last Tuesday. He was moving around, all right, but he wasn't looking out any window. Is that plain enough?"

Weldon sucked at his teeth again. "I 'spect it is. You sure 'bout this?"

Sara gave a sarcastic laugh. "Wanna see my hickey?"

"No reason to be snitty, Sara. I ain't doin' this for pleasure." Weldon heaved to his feet and gazed down at Peter. "You lookin' a bit peaked, Mr. Ramey. Hope it ain't somethin' you ate." He held the stare a moment longer, then pushed off through the crowd.

"God, Peter!" Sara cupped his face in her hands. "You looks awful!"

"Dizzy," he said, fumbling for his wallet; he tossed some bills on the counter. "C'mon, I need some air."

With Sara guiding him, he made it through the front door and leaned on the hood of a parked car, head down, gulping in the cold air. Her arm around his shoulders was a good weight that helped steady him, and after a few seconds he began to feel stronger, able to lift his head. The street—with its cobblestones and newly budded trees and old-fashioned lamp posts and tiny shops—looked like a prop for a model railroad. Wind prowled the sidewalks, spinning paper cups and fluttering awnings. A strong gust shivered him and brought a flashback of dizziness and vision. Once more he was reaching down toward that glint, only this time it was very close, so close that its energies were tingling his fingertips, pulling at him, and if he could just stretch out his hand another inch or two...Dizziness overwhelmed him. He caught himself on the hood of the car; his arm gave way, and he slumped forward, feeling the cold metal against his cheek.

Sara was calling to someone, asking for help, and he wanted to reassure her to say he'd be all right in a minute, but the words clogged in his throat and he continued lying there, watching the world tip and spin, until someone with arms stronger than Sara's lifted him and said, "Hey, man! You better stop hittin' the sauce or I might be tempted to snake your ol' lady."

Streetlight angled a rectangle of yellow glare across the foot of Sara's bed, illuminating her stockinged legs and half of Peter's bulk beneath the covers. She lit a cigarette, then—exasperated at having given into the habit again—she stubbed it out, turned on her side and lay watching the rise and fall Peter's chest. Dead to the world. Why, she wondered, was she such a sucker for the damaged ones? She laughed at herself; she knew the answer. She wanted to be the one to make them forget whatever had hurt them, usually another woman. A combination Florence Nightingale and sex therapist, that was her, and she could never resist a new challenge. Though Peter had not talked about it, she could tell some L.A. ghost owned half his heart. He had all the symptoms. Sudden silences, distracted stares, the way he jumped for the mailbox as soon as the postman came and yet was always disappointed by what he had received. She believed that she owned the other half of his heart, but whenever he started to go with it, to forget the past and immerse himself in the here and now, the ghost would rear up and he'd create a little distance. His approach to lovemaking, for instance. He'd come on soft and gentle, and then, just as they were on the verge of a new level of intimacy, he'd draw back, crack a joke or do something rough—like tackling her on the beach that morning—and she would feel cheap and sluttish. Sometimes she thought that the thing to do would be to tell him to get the hell out of her life, to come back and see her when his head was clear. But she knew she wouldn't. He owned more than half her heart.

She eased off the bed, careful not to wake him, and slipped out of her clothes. A branch scraped and the window, startling her, and she held her blouse up to cover her breasts. Oh, right! A Peeping Tom at a third-floor window. In New York, maybe, but not in Nantucket. She tossed the blouse into the laundry hamper and caught sight of herself in the fulllength mirror affixed to the closet door. In the dim light the reflection looked elongated and unfamiliar, and she had a feeling that Peter's ghost woman was watching her from across the continent, from another mirror. She could almost make her out. Tall, long-legged, a mournful expression. Sara didn't need to see her to know the woman had been sad: it was the ones who were the real heartbreaks, and the men whose hearts they had broken

were like fossil records of what the women were. They offered their sadness to be cured, yet it wasn't a cure they wanted, only another reason for sadness, a spicy bit to mix in with the stew they had been stirring all their lives. Sara moved closer to the mirror, and the illusion of the other woman was replaced by the conformation of her own body. "That's what I'm going to do to you, lady," she whispered. "Blot you out." The words sounded empty.

She turned back the bedspread and slid in beside Peter. He made a muffled noise, and she saw gleams of the streetlights in his eyes. "Sorry about earlier," he said.

"No problem," she said brightly. "I got Bob Frazier and Jerry Highsmith to help bring you home. Do you remember?"

"Vaguely. I'm surprised Jerry could tear himself away from his redhead. Sweet Ginger!" He lifted his arm so Sara could burrow in against his shoulder. "I guess your reputation's ruined."

"I don't know about that, but it's certainly getting more exotic all the time."

He laughed.

"Peter?" she said.

"Yeah?"

"I'm worried about these spells of yours. That's what this was, wasn't it?"

"Yeah." He was silent a moment. "I'm worried, too. I've been having them two and three times a day, and that's never happened before. But there's nothing I can do except try not to think about them."

"Can you see what's going to happen?"

"Not really, and there's no point in trying to figure it out. I can't ever use what I see. It just happens, whatever's going to, and then I understand that *that* was what the premonition was about. It's a pretty worthless gift."

Sara snuggled closer, throwing her leg across his hip. "Why don't we go over to the Cape tomorrow?"

"I was going to check out Mill's garbage dump."

"Okay. We can do that in the morning and still catch the three o'clock boat. It might be good for you to get off the island for a day or so."

"All right. Maybe that's not such a bad idea."

Sara shifted her leg and realized that he was erect. She eased her hand beneath the covers to touch him, and he turned so as to allow her better access. His breath quickened and he kissed her—gentle, treasuring kisses on her lips, her throat, her eyes—and his hips moved in counterpoint to the rhythm of her hand, slowly at first, becoming insistent, convulsive, until he was prodding against her thigh and

she had to take her hand away and let him slip between her legs, opening her. Her thoughts were dissolving into a medium of urgency, her consciousness being reduced to an awareness of heat and shadows. But when he lifted himself above her, that brief separation broke the spell, and she could suddenly hear the fretful sounds of the wind, could see the particulars of his face and the light fixture on the ceiling behind him. His features seemed to sharpen, to grow alert, and he opened his mouth to speak. She put a finger to his lips. *Please, Peter! No jokes. This is serious.* She beamed the thoughts at him, and maybe they sank in. His face slackened, and as she guided him into place he moaned, a despairing sound such as a ghost might make at the end of its earthly term; and then she was clawing at him, driving him deeper inside, and talking to him, not words, just breathy noises, sighs and whispers, but having meanings that he would understand.

### 3

That same night while Peter and Sara were asleep, Sally McColl was driving her jeep along the blacktop that led to Smith Point. She was drunk and not giving a good goddamn where she wandered, steering in a never-ending S, sending the headlights veering across low gorsey hills and gnarled hawthorns. With one hand she kept a chokehold on a pint of cherry brandy, her third of the evening. 'Sconset Sally, they called her. Crazy Sally. Seventy-four years old and still able to shell scallops and row better than most men on the island. Wrapped in a couple of Salvation Army dresses, two moth-eaten sweaters, a tweed jacket gone at the elbows, and generally looking like a bag lady from hell. Brambles of white hair sticking out from under a battered fisherman's hat. Static fizzled on the radio, and Sally accompanied it with mutters, curses, and fitful bursts of song, all things that echoed the jumble of her thoughts. She parked near the spot where the blacktop gave out, staggered from the jeep and stumped through the soft sand to the top of a dune. There she swayed for a moment, dizzyed by the pour of wind and the sweep of darkness broken only for a few stars on the horizon. "Whoo-ooh!" she screeched; the wind sucked up her yell and added it to its sound. She lurched forward, slipped and went rolling down the face of the dune. Sand adhering to her tongue, spitting, she sat up and found that somehow she'd managed to hold onto the bottle, that the cap was still on even though she hadn't screwed it tight. A flicker of paranoia set her to jerking

her head from side-to-side. She didn't want anybody spying on her, spreading more stories about old drunk Sally. The ones they told were bad enough. Half were lies, and the rest were slanted to make her seem loopy...like the one about how she'd bought herself a mail-order husband and he'd run off after two weeks, stowed away on a boat, scared to death of her, and she had come riding on horseback through Nantucket, hoping to bring him home. A swarthy little bump of a man, Eye-talian, no English, and he hadn't known shit from short-cake in bed. Better to do yourself than fool with a pimple like him. All she'd wanted had been the goddamn trousers she'd dressed him in, and the tale-tellers had cast her as a desperate woman. Bastards! Buncha goddamn...

Sally's train of thought pulled into a tunnel, and she sat staring blankly at the dark. Damn cold, it was, and windy a bit as well. She took a swig of brandy; when it hit bottom she felt ten degrees warmer. Another swig put her legs under her, and she started walking along the beach away from the point, searching for a nice lonesome spot where nobody was likely to happen by. That was what she wanted. Just to sit and spit and feel the night on her skin. You couldn't hardly find such a place nowadays, what with all the summer trash floating in from the mainland, the Gucci-Pucci sissies and the little swish-tailed chick-women eager to bend over and butter their behinds for the first five-hundred-dollar suit that showed interest, probably some fat boy junior executive who couldn't get it up and would marry 'em just for the privilege of being humiliated every night...That train of thought went spiraling off, and Sally spiraled after it. She sat down with a thump. She gave out with a cackle, liked the sound of it, and cackled louder. She sipped at the brandy, wishing that she had brought another bottle, letting her thoughts subside into a crackle of half-formed images and memories that seemed to have been urged upon her by the thrashings and skitterings of the wind. As her eyes adjusted, she made out a couple of houses lumped against the lesser blackness of the sky. Vacant summer places. No, wait! Those were them what-chamacallems. Condominiums. What had that Ramey boy said about 'em? Iniums with a condom slipped over each. Prophylactic lives. He was a good boy, that Peter. The first person she'd met with the gift for dog's years, and it was strong in him, stronger than her gift, which wasn't good for much except for guessing the weather, and she was so old now that her bones could do that just as well. He'd told her how some people in California had blown up condominiums to protect the beauty of their coastline, and it had struck her as a fine idea. The thought of condominiums ringing the island caused her to tear up, and with a burst of drunken nostalgia she remembered



what a wonder the sea had been when she was a girl. Clean, pure, rife with spirits. She'd been able to sense those spirits...

Battering and crunching from somewhere off in the dunes. She staggered to her feet, cocking an ear. More sounds of breakage. She headed toward them, toward the condominiums. Might be some kids vandalizing the place. If so, she'd cheer 'em on. But as she climbed to the top of the nearest dune, the sounds died away. Then the wind picked up, not howling or roaring, but with a weird ululation, almost a melody, as if it were pouring through the holes of an enormous flute.

The back of Sally's neck prickled, and a cold sliny worm of fear wriggled the length of her spine. She was close enough to the condominiums to see their rooflines against the sky, but she could see nothing else. There was only the eerie music of the wind, repeating the same passage of five notes over and over. Then it, too, died. Sally took a slug of brandy, screwed up her courage, and started walking again; the beach grass swayed and tickled her hands, and the tickling spread gooseflesh up her arms. About twenty feet from the first condominium she stopped, her heartbeat ragged. Fear was turning the brandy to a sour mess in her stomach. What was there to be afraid of, she asked herself. The wind? *Shit!* She had another slug of brandy and went forward. It was so dark she had to grope her way along the wall, and she was startled to find a hole smack in the middle of it. Bigger than a damn door, it was. Edged by broken boards and ripped shingles. Like a giant fist had smashed it through. Her mouth was cottony, but she stepped inside. She rummaged in her pockets, dug out a box of kitchen matches, lit one and cupped it with her hands until it burned steadily. The room was unfurnished, just carpeting and telephone fixtures and paint-spattered newspapers and rags. Sliding glass doors were inset into the opposite wall, but most of the glass had been blown out, crunching under her feet; as she drew near, an icicle-shaped piece hanging from the frame caught the glow of the match and for a second was etched on the dark like a fiery tooth. The match scorched her fingers. She dropped it and lit another and moved into the next room. More holes and a heaviness in the air, as if the house were holding its breath. Nerves, she thought. God-damn old-woman nerves. Maybe it *had* been kids, crunk and ramming a car into the walls. A breeze eeled from somewhere and puffed out the match. She lit a third one. The breeze extinguished it, too, and she realized that kids hadn't been responsible for the damage, because the breeze didn't blow away this time: it fluttered around her, lifting her dress, her hair, twining about her legs, patting and frisking her all over, and in the breeze was a feeling, a knowledge, that turned her bones to splinters of black ice. Something had come

from the sea, some evil thing with the wind for a body had smashed holes in the walls to play its foul, spine-chilling music, and it was surrounding her, toying with her, getting ready to whirl her off to hell and gone. It had a clammy, bitter smell, and that smell clung to her skin everywhere it touched.

Sally backed into the first room, wanting to scream but only able to manage a feeble squawk. The wind flowed after her, lifting the newspapers and flapping them at her like crinkly white bats, matting them against her face and chest. Then she screamed. She dove for the hole in the wall and flung herself into a frenzied, heart-bustin run, stumbling, falling, scrambling to her feet and waving her arms and yelling. Behind her, the wind gushed from the house, roaring, and she imagined it shaping itself into a towering figure, a black demon who was laughing at her, letting her think she might make it before swooping down and tearing her apart. She rolled down the face of the last dune, and, her breath sobbing, clawed at the door handle of the jeep; she jiggled the key in the ignition, prayed until the engine turned over, and then, gears grinding, swerved off along the Nantucket road.

She was halfway to 'Sconset before she grew calm enough to think what to do, and the first thing she decided was to drive straight to Nantucket and tell Hugh Weldon. Though God only knew what *he'd* do. Or what *he'd* say. That scrawny flint of a man! Like as not *he'd* laugh in her face and be off to share the latest 'Sconset Sally story with his cronies. No, she told herself. There weren't going to be anymore stories about ol' Sally drunk as the moon and seeing ghosts and raving about the wind. They wouldn't believe her, so let 'em think kids had done it. A little sun of gleeful viciousness rose in her thoughts, burning away the shadows of her fear and heating her blood even quicker than would a jolt of cherry brandy. Let it happen, whatever was going to happen, and *then* she'd tell her story, *then* she'd say *I* would have told you sooner, but you would have called me crazy. Oh, no! She wouldn't be the butt of their jokes this time. Let 'em find out for themselves that some new devil had come from the sea.

## 4

Mills Lindstrom's boat was a Boston whaler, about twenty feet of blue squarish hull with a couple of bucket seats, a control pylon, and a fiftyfive horsepower outboard racketing behind. Sara had to sit on

Peter's lap, and while he wouldn't have minded that in any case, in this case he appreciated the extra warmth. Though it was calm, the sea rolling in long swells, heavy clouds and a cold front had settled over the island; farther out the sun was breaking through, but all around them crumbling banks of whitish mist hung close to the water. The gloom couldn't dampen Peter's mood, however; he was anticipating a pleasant weekend with Sara and gave hardly a thought to their destination, carrying on a steady stream of chatter. Mills, on the other hand, was brooding and taciturn, and when they came in sight of the off-shore pollution aggregate, a dirty brown stain spreading for hundreds of yards across the water, he pulled his pipe from beneath his rain gear and set to chomping the stem, as if to restrain impassioned speech.

Peter borrowed Mills' binoculars and peered ahead. The surface of the aggregate was pocked by thousands of white objects; at this distance they looked like bones sticking up from thin soil. Streamers of mist were woven across it, and the edge was shifting sluggishly, an obscene cap sliding over the dome of a swell. It was a no-man's land, an ugly blot, and as they drew near, its ugliness increased. The most common of the white objects were Clorox bottles such as fishermen used to mark the spread of their nets; there were also a great many fluorescent tubes, other plastic debris, torn pieces of netting, and driftwood, all mired in a pale brown jelly of decayed oil products. It was a Golgotha of the inorganic world, a plain of ultimate spiritual malaise, of entropy triumphant, and perhaps, thought Peter, the entire earth would one day come to resemble it. The briny, bitter stench made his skin crawl.

"God," said Sara as they began cruising along the edge; she opened her mouth to say more but couldn't find the words.

"I see why you felt like drinking last night," said Peter to Mills, who just shook his head and grunted.

"Can we go into it?" asked Sara.

"All them torn nets'll foul the propeller." Mills stared at her askance. "Ain't it bad enough from out here?"

"We can tip up the motor and row in," Peter suggested. "Come on, Mills. It'll be like landing on the moon."

And, indeed, as they rowed into the aggregate, cutting through the pale brown stuff, Peter felt that they had crossed some intangible border into uncharted territory. The air seemed heavier, full of suppressed energy, and the silence seemed deeper; the only sound was the slosh of the oars. Mills had told Peter that the thing would have roughly a spiral shape, due to the actions of opposing currents, and that intensified his feeling of having entered the unknown; he pic-

tured them as characters in a fantasy novel, creeping across a great device inlaid on the floor of an abandoned temple. Debris bobbed against the hull. The brown glop had the consistency of Jello that hadn't set properly, and when Peter dipped his hand into it, beads accumulated on his fingers. Some of the textures on the surface had a horrid, almost organic beauty: bleached, wormlike tendrils of netting mired in the slick, reminding Peter of some animal's diseased spoor; larval chips of wood matted on a bed of glistening cellophane; a blue plastic lid bearing a girl's sunbonneted face embedded in a spaghetti of styrofoam strips. They would point out such oddities to each other, but nobody was eager to talk. The desolation of the aggregate was oppressive, and not even a ray of sunlight fingering the boat, as if a searchlight were keeping track of them from the real world, not even that could dispell the gloom. Then, about two hundred yards in, Peter saw something shiny inside an opaque plastic container, reached down and picked it up.

The instant he brought it on board he realized that this was the object about which he had experienced the premonition, and he had the urge to throw it back; but he felt such a powerful attraction to it that instead he removed the lid and lifted out a pair of silver combs, the sort Spanish women wear in their hair. Touching them, he had a vivid mental image of a young woman's face: a pale, drawn face that might have been beautiful but was starved-thin and worn by sorrows. Gabriela. The name seeped into his consciousness the way a pawtrack frozen in the ground melts up from beneath the snow during a thaw. Gabriela Pa...Pasco...Pascual. His finger traced the design etched on the combs, and every curlicue conveyed a sense of her personality. Sadness, loneliness, and—most of all—terror. She'd been afraid for a very long time. Sara asked to see the combs, took them, and his ghostly impression of Gabriela Pascual's life flew apart like a creature of foam, leaving him disoriented.

"They're beautiful," said Sara. "And they must be really old."

"Looks like Mexican work," said Mills. "Hmph. What we got here?" He stretched out his oar, trying to snag something; he hauled the oar back in and Sara lifted the thing from the blade: a rag showing yellow streaks through its coating of slick.

"It's a blouse." Sara turned it in her hands, her nose wrinkling at having to touch the slick; she stopped turning it and stared at Peter. "Oh, God! It's Ellen Borchard's."

Peter took it from her. Beneath the manufacturer's label was Ellen Borchard's name tag. He closed his eyes, hoping to read some impression as he had with the silver combs. Nothing. His gift had deserted him. But he had a bad feeling that he knew exactly what had hap-

pened to the girl.

"Better take that to Hugh Weldon," said Mills. "Might..." He broke off and stared out over the aggregate.

At first Peter didn't see what had caught Mills's eye; then he noticed that a wind had sprung up. A most peculiar wind. It was moving slowly around the boat about fifty feet away, its path evident by the agitation of the debris over which it passed; it whispered and sighed, and with a sucking noise a couple of Clorox bottles popped out of the slick and spun into the air. Each time the wind made a complete circuit of the boat, it seemed to have grown a little stronger.

"What the hell!" Mills's face was drained of color, the web of broken blood vessels on his cheeks showing like a bright red tattoo.

Sara's nails bit into Peter's arm, and he was overwhelmed by the knowledge that this wind was what he had been warned against. Panicked, he shook Sara off, scrambled to the back of the boat and tipped down the outboard motor.

"The nets..." Mills began.

"Fuck the nets! Let's get out of here!"

The wind was keening, and the entire surface of the aggregate was starting to heave. Crouched in the stern, Peter was again struck by its resemblance to a graveyard with bones sticking out of the earth, only now all the bones were wiggling, working themselves loose. Some of the Clorox bottles were rolling sluggishly along, bouncing high when they hit an obstruction. The sight froze him for a moment, but as Mills fired the engine he crawled back to his seat and pulled Sara down with him. Mills turned the boat toward Madaket. The slick glubbed and smacked against the hull, and brown flecks splashed onto the windshield and oozed sideways. With each passing second the wind grew stronger and louder, building to a howl that drowned out the motor. A fluorescent tube went twirling up beside them like a cheerleader's baton; bottles and cellophane and splatters of oil slick flew at them from every direction. Sara ducked her face into Peter's shoulder, and he held her tight, praying that the propeller wouldn't foul. Mills swerved the boat to avoid a piece of driftwood that sailed past the bow, and then they were into clear water, out of the wind—though they could still hear it raging—and running down the long slope of a swell.

Relieved, Peter stroked Sara's hair and let out a shuddering breath; but when he glanced behind them all his relief went glimmering. Thousands upon thousands of Clorox bottles and fluorescent tubes and other debris were spinning in mid-air above the aggregate—an insane mobile posed against the gray sky—and just beyond the edge narrow tracks of water were being lashed up, as if a windy knife were

slicing back and forth across it, undecided whether or not to follow them home.

Hugh Weldon had been out in Madaket investigating the vandalism of the condominiums, and after receiving the radio call it had only taken him a few minutes to get to Peter's cottage. He sat beside Mills at the picnic table, listening to their story, and from the perspective of the sofa bunk, where Peter was sitting, his arm around Sara, the chief presented an angular, mantislike silhouette against the gray light from the window; the squabbling of the police radio outside seemed part of his persona, a radiation emanating from him. When they had finished he stood, walked to the wood stove, lifted the lid and spat inside it; the stove crackled and spat back a spark.

"If it was just you two," he said to Peter and Sara, "I'd run you in and find out what you been smokin'". But Mills here don't have the imagination for this kind of foolishness, so I guess I got to believe you." He set down the lid with a clank and squinted at Peter. "You said you wrote somethin' 'bout Ellen Borchard in your book. What?"

Peter leaned forward, resting his elbows on his knees. "She was down at Smith Point just after dark. She was angry at her parents, and she wanted to scare them. So she took off her blouse—she had extra clothes with her, because she was planning to run away—and was about to rip it up, to make them think she'd been murdered, when the wind killed her."

"Now how'd it do that?" asked Weldon.

"In the book the wind was a sort of elemental. Cruel, capricious. It played with her. Knocked her down, rolled her along the shingle. Then it would let her up and knock her down again. She was bleeding all over from the shell-cuts, and screaming. Finally it whirled her up and out to sea." Peter stared down at his hands; the inside of his head felt heavy, solid, as if his brains were made of mercury.

"Jesus Christ!" said Weldon. "What you got to say 'bout that, Mills?"

"It wasn't no normal wind," said Mills. "That's all I know."

"Jesus Christ!" repeated Weldon; he rubbed the back of his neck and peered at Peter. "I been twenty years at this job and I've heard some tall tales. But this...what did you say it was? An elemental?"

"Yeah, but I don't really know for sure. Maybe if I could handle those combs again, I could learn more about it."

"Peter." Sara put her hand on his arm; her brow was furrowed. "Why don't we let Hugh deal with it?"

Weldon was amused. "Naw, Sara. You let Mr. Ramey see what he can do." He chuckled. "Maybe he can tell me how the Red Sox

are gonna do this year. Me and Mills can have another look at that mess off the point."

Mill's neck seemed to retract into his shoulders. "I ain't goin' back out there, Hugh. And if you want my opinion, you better keep clear of it yourself."

"Damn it, Mills." Weldon smacked his hand against his hip. "I ain't gonna beg, but you sure as hell could save me some trouble. It'll take me an hour to get the Coast Guard boys off their duffs. Wait a minute!" He turned to Peter. "Maybe you people were seein' things. There musta been all kinds of bad chemicals fumin' up from that mess. Could be you breathed somethin' in." Brakes squealed, a car door slammed, and seconds later the bedraggled figure of Sally McColl strode past the window and knocked on the door.

"What in God's name does she want?" said Weldon.

Peter opened the door, and Sally gave him a gap-toothed grin. "Mornin', Peter," she said. She was wearing a stained raincoat over her usual assortment of dresses and sweaters, and a gaily-colored man's necktie for a scarf. "Is that skinny ol' fart Hugh Weldon inside?"

"I ain't got time for your crap today, Sally," called Weldon.

Sally pushed past Peter. "Mornin', Sara. Mills."

"Hear one of your dogs just had a litter," said Mills.

"Yep. Six snarly little bastards." Sally wiped her nose with the back of her hand and checked it to see what had rubbed off. "You in the market?"

"I might drop 'round and take a look," said Mills. "Dobermans or Shepherds?"

"Dobermans. Gonna be fierce."

"What's on your mind, Sally?" said Weldon, stepping between them.

"Got a confession to make."

Weldon chuckled. "What'd you do now? You sure as hell didn't burglarize no dress shop."

A frown etched the wrinkles deeper on Sally's face. "You stupid son of a bitch," she said flatly. "I swear, God musta been runnin' short of everything but horseshit when He made you."

"Listen, you ol'..."

"Musta ground up your balls and used 'em for brains," Sally went on. "Musta..."

"Sally!" Peter pushed them apart and took the old woman by the shoulders. A glaze faded from her eyes as she looked at him. At last she shrugged free of his grasp and patted down her hair: a peculiarly feminine gesture for someone so shapeless and careworn.

"I shoulda told you sooner," she said to Weldon. "But I was sick

of you laughin' at me. Then I decided it might be important and I'd have to risk listenin' to your jackass bray. So I'm tellin' you." She looked out the window. "I know what done them condominiums. It was the wind." She snapped a hateful glance at Weldon. "And I ain't crazy, neither!"

Peter felt weak in the knees. They were surrounded by trouble; it was in the air as it had been off Smith Point, yet stronger, as if he were becoming sensitized to the feeling.

"The wind," said Weldon, acting dazed.

"That's right," said Sally defiantly. "It punched holes in them damn buildin's and was whistlin' through 'em like it was playin' music." She glared at him. "Don't you believe me?"

"He believes you," said Peter. "We think the wind killed Ellen Borchard."

"Now don't be spreadin' that around! We ain't sure!" Weldon said it desperately, clinging to disbelief.

Sally crossed the room to Peter. "It's true 'bout the Borchard girl, ain't it?"

"I think so," he said.

"And that thing what killed her, it's here in Madaket. You feel it, don'tcha?"

He nodded. "Yeah."

Sally headed for the door.

"Where you goin'?" asked Weldon. She mumbled and went outside; Peter saw her pacing back and forth in the yard. "Crazy ol' bat," said Weldon.

"Mebbe she is," said Mills. "But you ought not to be treatin' her so harsh after all she's done."

"What's she done?" asked Peter.

"Sally used to live up in Madaket," said Mills. "And whenever a ship would run up on Dry Shoals or one of the others, she'd make for the wreck in that ol' lobster boat of hers. Most times she'd beat the Coast Guard to 'em. Musta saved fifty or sixty souls over the years, sailin' out in the worst kind of weather."

"Mills!" said Weldon emphatically. "Run me out to that garbage dump of yours."

Mills stood and hitched up his pants. "Ain't you been listenin', Hugh? Peter and Sally say that thing's 'round here somewhere."

Weldon was a frustrated man. He sucked at his teeth, and his face worked. He picked up the container holding the combs, glanced at Peter, then set the container down.

"You want me to see what I can learn from those?" asked Peter.

Weldon shrugged. "Can't hurt nothin', I guess." He stared out



the window, as if unconcerned with issue.

Peter took the container and sat down next to Sara. "Wait," she said. "I don't understand. If this thing is nearby, shouldn't we get away from here?" Nobody answered.

The plastic container was cold, and when Peter pried off the lid the cold welled out at him. Intense, aching cold, as if he had opened the door to a meat locker.

Sally burst into the room and pointed at the container. "What's that?"

"Some old combs," said Peter. "They didn't feel like this when I found them. Not as strong."

"Feel like what?" asked Weldon; every new mystery seemed to be unnerving him further, and Peter suspected that if the mysteries weren't cleared up soon, the chief would start disbelieving them on purely practical grounds.

Sally came over to Peter and looked into the container. "Gimme one," she said, extending a grimy hand. Weldon and Mills moved up behind her, like two old soldiers flanking their mad queen.

Reluctantly, Peter picked up one of the combs. Its coldness flowed into his arm, his head, and for a moment he was in the midst of a stormtossed sea, terrified, waves crashing over the bows of a fishing boat and the wind singing around him. He dropped the comb. His hands were trembling, and his heart was doing a jig against his chest wall.

"Oh, shit," he said to no one in particular. "I don't know if I want to do this."

Sara gave Sally her seat beside Peter, and as they handled the combs, setting them down every minute or so to report what they had learned, she chewed her nails and fretted. She could relate to Hugh Weldon's frustration; it was awful just to sit and watch. Each time Peter and Sally handled the combs their respiration grew shallow and their eyes rolled back, and when they laid them aside they appeared drained and frightened.

"Gabriela Pascual was from Miami," said Peter. "I can't tell exactly when all this happened, but it was years ago...because in my image of her, her clothes look a little old-fashioned. Maybe ten or fifteen years back. Something like that. Anyway, there was trouble for her on shore, some emotional entanglement, and her brother didn't want to leave her alone, so he took along on a fishing voyage. He was a commercial fisherman."

"She had the gift," Sally chimed in. "That's why there's so much of her in the combs. That, and because she killed herself and died

holdin' 'em."

"Why'd she kill herself?" asked Weldon.

"Fear," said Peter. "Loneliness. Crazy as it sounds, the wind was holding her prisoner. I think she cracked up from being alone on a drifting boat with only this thing—the elemental—for company."

"Alone?" said Weldon. "What happened to her brother?"

"He died." Sally's voice was shaky. "The wind came down and killed 'em all 'cept this Gabriela. It wanted her."

As the story unfolded, gusts of wind began to shudder the cottage and Sara tried to remain unconcerned as to whether or not they were natural phenomena. She turned her eyes from the window, away from the heaving trees and bushes, and concentrated on what was being said; but that in itself was so eerie that she couldn't keep from jumping whenever the panes rattled. Gabriela Pascual, said Peter, had been frequently seasick during the cruise; she had been frightened of the crew, most of whom considered her bad luck, and possessed by a feeling of imminent disaster. And, Sally added, that premonition had been borne out. One cloudless, calm day the elemental had swept down and killed everyone. Everyone except Gabriela. It had whirled the crew and her brother into the air, smashed them against bulkheads, dropped them onto the decks. She had expected to die as well, but it had seemed interested in her. It had caressed her and played with her, knocking her down and rolling her about; and at night it had poured through the passageways and broken windows, making a chilling music that—as the days passed and the ship drifted north—she came to half-understand.

"She didn't think of it as a spirit," said Peter. "There wasn't anything mystical about it to her mind. It struck her as being kind of a..."

"An animal," interrupted Sally. "A big, stupid animal. Vicious, it was. But not evil. 'Least it didn't feel evil to her."

Gabriela, Peter went on, had never been sure what it wanted of her—perhaps her presence had been all. Most of the time it had left her alone. Then, suddenly, it would spring up out of a calm to juggle splinters of glass or chase her about. Once the ship had drifted near to shore, and when she had attempted to jump over the side, the elemental had battered her and driven her belowdecks. Though at first it had controlled the drift of the ship, gradually it lost interest in her and on several occasions the ship almost foundered. Finally, no longer caring to prolong the inevitable, she had cut her wrists and died clutching the container holding her most valued possessions, her grandmother's silver combs, with the wind howling in her ears.

Peter leaned back against the wall, his eyes shut, and Sally sighed

and patted her breast. For a long moment to no one spoke.

"Wonder why it's hangin' 'round that garbage out there," said Mills.

"Maybe no reason," said Peter dully. "Or maybe it's attracted to slack points in the tides, to some condition of the air."

"I don't get it," said Weldon. "What the hell is it? It can't be no animal."

"Why not?" Peter stood, swayed, then righted himself. "What's wind, anyway? Charged ions, vacating air masses. Who's to say that some stable form of ions couldn't approximate a life? Could be there's one of these at the heart of every storm, and they've always been mistaken for spirits, giving an anthropomorphic character. Like Ariel." He laughed disconsolately. "It's no breezy sprite, that's for sure."

Sally's eyes looked unnaturally bright, like watery jewels lodged in her weathered face. "The sea breeds 'em," she said firmly, as if that were explanation enough of anything strange.

"Peter's book was right," said Sara. "It's an elemental. That's what you're describing, anyway. A violent, inhuman creature, part spirit and part animal." She laughed, and the laugh edged a bit high, bordering on the hysteric. "It's hard to believe."

"Right!" said Weldon. "Damned hard! I got an ol' crazy woman and a man I don't know from Adam tellin' me . . ."

"Listen!" said Mills; he walked to the door and swung it open.

It took Sara a second to fix on the sound, but then she realized that the wind had died, had gone from heavy gusts to trifling breezes—in an instant, and further away, coming from the sea, or nearer, maybe as close as Tennessee Avenue, she heard a roaring.

## 5

A few moments earlier Jerry Highsmith had been both earning his living and looking forward to a night of exotic pleasures in the arms of Ginger McCurdy. He was standing in front of one of the houses on Tennessee Avenue, its quarterboard reading AHAB-ITAT, and a collection of old harpoons and whalebones mounted on either side of the door; his bicycle leaned against a rail fence behind him, and ranged around him, straddling their bikes, dolled up in pastel-hued jogging suits and sweat clothes, were twenty-six members of the Peach State Ramblers Bicycle Club. Ten men, sixteen women. The women

were all in good shape, but most were in their thirties, a bit long in the tooth for Jerry's taste. Ginger, on the other hand, was prime. Twenty-three or twenty-four, with red hair down to her ass and a body that wouldn't quit. She had peeled off her sweats and was blooming out a halter and shorts cut so high that each time she dismounted you could see right up to the Pearly Gates. And she knew what she was doing: every jiggle of those twin jaloobies was aimed at his crotch. She had pressed to the front of the group and was attending to his spiel about the bullshit whaling days. Oh, yeah! Ginger was ready. A couple of lobsters, a little wine, a stroll along the waterfront, and then by God he'd pump her so full of the Nantucket Experience that she'd breach like a snow-white hill.

Thar she fuckin' blows!

"Now, y'all..." he began.

They tittered; they liked him mocking their accent.

He grinned abashedly as if he hadn't known what he was doing. "Must be catchin'," he said. "Now you people probably haven't had a chance to visit the Whaling Museum, have you?"

A chorus of Nos.

"Well then, I'll give you a course in harpoonin'." He pointed at the wall of the AHAB-ITAT. "That top one with the single barb stickin' off the side, that's the kind most commonly used during the whalin' era. The shaft's of ash. That was the preferred wood. It stands up to the weather"—he stared pointedly at Ginger—"and it won't bend under pressure." Ginger tried to constrain a smile. "Now that one," he continued, keeping an eye on her, "the one with the arrow point and no barbs, that was favored by some whalers. They said it allowed for deeper penetration."

"What about the one with two barbs?" asked someone.

Jerry peered over heads and saw that the questioner was his second choice. Ms. Selena Persons. A nice thirtyish brunette, flat-chested, but with killer legs. Despite the fact that he was obviously after Ginger, she hadn't lost interest. Who knows? A double-header might be a possibility.

"That was used toward the end of the whalin' era," he said. "But generally two-barbed harpoons weren't considered as effective as single-barbed ones. I don't know why, exactly. Might have just been stubbornness on the whalers' part. Resistance to change. They knew the ol' single-barb could give satisfaction."

Ms. Persons met his gaze with the glimmer of a smile.

"Course," Jerry continued, addressing all the Rambles, "now the shaft's tipped with a charge that explodes inside the whale." He winked at Ginger and added *sotto voce*, "Must be a rush."

She covered her mouth with her hand.

"Okay, folks!" Jerry swung his bike away from the fence. "Mount up and we'll be off to the next thrillin' attraction."

Laughing and chattering, the Ramblers started to mount, but just then a powerful gust of wind swept down Tennessee Avenue, causing squeals and blowing away hats. Several of the riders overbalanced and fell, and several more nearly did. Ginger stumbled forward and clung to Jerry, giving him chest-to-chest massage. "Nice catch," she said, doing a little writhe as she stepped away.

"Nice toss," he replied.

She smiled, but the smile faded and was replaced by a bewildered look. "What's that?"

Jerry turned. About twenty yards away a column of whirling leaves had formed above the blacktop; it was slender, only a few feet high, and though he had never seen anything similar it alarmed him no more than had the freakish gust of wind. Within seconds, however, the column had grown to a height of fifteen feet; twigs and gravel and branches were being sucked into it, and it sounded like a miniature tornado. Someone screamed. Ginger clung to him in genuine fright. There was a rank smell in the air, and a pressure was building in Jerry's ears. He couldn't be sure, because the column was spinning so rapidly, but it seemed to be assuming a roughly human shape, a dark green figure made of plant litter and stones. His mouth had gone dry, and he restrained an urge to throw Ginger aside and run.

"Come on!" he shouted.

A couple of the Ramblers managed to mount their bicycles, but the wind had grown stronger, roaring, and it sent them wobbling and crashing into the weeds. The rest huddled together, their hair whipping about, and stared at the great Druid thing that was taking shape and swaying above them, as tall as the treetops. Shingles were popping off the sides of the houses, sailing up and being absorbed by the figure; and as Jerry tried to outvoice the wind, yelling at the Ramblers to lie flat, he saw the whalebones and harpoons ripped from the wall of the AHAB-ITAT. The windows of the house exploded outward. One man clutched the bloody flap of his cheek, which had been sliced open by a shard of glass; a woman grabbed the back of her knee and crumpled. Jerry shouted a final warning and pulled Ginger down with him into the roadside ditch. She squirmed and struggled, in a panic, but he forced her head down and held tight. The figure had risen much higher than the trees, and though it was still swaying, its form had stabilized somewhat. It had a face now: a graveyard smile of gray shingles and two circular patches of stones for eyes: a terrible blank gaze that seemed responsible for the increas-

ing air pressure. Jerry's heart boomed in his inner ear, and his blood felt like sludge. The figure kept swelling, up and up; the roar was resolving into an oscillating hum that shivered the ground. Stones and leaves were beginning to spray out of it. Jerry knew, *knew*, what was going to happen, and he couldn't keep from watching. Amid a flurry of leaves he saw one of the harpoons flit through the air, impaling a woman who had been trying to stand. The force of the blow drove her out of Jerry's field of vision. Then the great figure exploded. Jerry squeezed his eyes shut. Twigs and balls of dirt and gravel stung him. Ginger leaped sideways and collapsed atop him, clawing at his hip. He waited for something worse to happen, but nothing did. "You okay?" he asked, pushing Ginger away by the shoulders.

She wasn't okay.

A splintered inch of whalebone stuck out from the center of her forehead. Shrieking with revulsion, Jerry wriggled from beneath her and came to his hands and knees. A moan. One of the men was crawling toward him, his face a mask of blood, a ragged hole where his right eye had been; his good eye looked glazed like a doll's. Horrified, not knowing what to do, Jerry scrambled to his feet and backed away. All the harpoons, he saw, had found targets. Most of the Ramblers lay unmoving, their blood smeared over the blacktop; the rest were sitting up, dazed and bleeding. Jerry's heel struck something, and he spun about. The quarterboard of the AHAB-ITAT had nailed Ms. Selena Persons vampire-style to the roadside dirt; the board had been driven so deep into the ground that only the letter A was showing above the mired ruin of her jogging suit, as if she were an exhibit. Jerry began to tremble, and tears started from his eyes.

A breeze ruffled his hair.

Somebody wailed, shocking him from his daze. He should call the hospital, the police. But where was a phone? Most of the houses were empty, waiting for summer tenants, and the phones wouldn't be working. Somebody must have seen what had happened, though. He should just do what he could until help arrived. Gathering himself, he walked toward the man whose eye was missing; but before he had gone more than a few paces a fierce gust of wind struck him in the back and knocked him flat.

This time the roaring was all around him, the pressure so intense that it seemed a white-hot needle had pierced him from ear-to-ear. He shut his eyes and clamped both hands to his ears, trying to smother the pain. Then he felt himself lifted. He couldn't believe it at first. Even when he opened his eyes and saw that he was being borne aloft, revolving in a slow circle, it made no sense. He couldn't hear, and the quiet added to his sense of unreality; further adding to it, a

riderless bicycle pedaled past. The air was full of sticks and leaves and pebbles, a threadbare curtain between him and the world, and he imagined himself rising in the gorge of that hideous dark figure. Ginger McCurdy was flying about twenty feet overhead, her red hair streaming, arms floating languidly as if in a dance. She was revolving faster than he, and he realized that his rate of spin was increasing as he rose. He saw what was going to happen: you went higher and higher, faster and faster, until you were spewed out, shot out over the village. His mind rebelled at the prospect of death, and he tried to swim back down the wind, flailing, kicking bursting with fear. But as he whirled higher, twisting and turning, it became hard to breathe, to think, and he was too dizzy to be afraid any longer. Another woman sailed by a few feet sway. Her mouth was open, her face contorted; blood dripped from her scalp. She clawed at him, and her reached out to her, not knowing why he bothered. Their hands just missed touching. Thoughts were coming one at a time. Maybe he'd land in the water. Miraculous Survivor Of Freak Tornado. Maybe he'd fly across the island and settle gently in a Nantucket treetop. A broken leg, a bruise or two. They'd set up drinks for him in the Atlantic Cafe . Maybe Connie Keating would finally come across, would finally recognize the miraculous potential of Jerry Highsmith. Maybe. He was tumbling now, limbs jerking about, and her gave up thinking. Flash glimpses of the gapped houses below, of the other dancers on the wind, moving with spasmodic abandon. Suddenly, as he was bent backwards by a violent updraft, there was a wrenching pain inside him, a grating, then a vital dislocation that delivered him from pain. Oh Christ Jesus! Oh God! Dazzles exploded behind his eyes. Something bright blue flopped past him, and he died.

## 6

After the column of leaves and branches looming up from Tennessee Avenue had vanished, after the roaring had died, Hugh Weldon sprinted for his squad car with Peter and Sara at his heels. He frowned as they piled in but made no objection, and this, Peter thought, was probably a sign that he had stopped trying to rationalize events, that he accepted the wind as a force to which normal procedures did not apply. He switched on the siren, and they sped off. But less than fifty yards from the cottage he slammed on the brakes. A woman was hanging in a hawthorn tree beside the road, an old-fashioned har-

poon plunged through her chest. There was no point in checking to see if she was alive. All her major bones were quite obviously broken and she was painted with blood head to foot, making her look like a horrid African doll set out as a warning to trespassers.

Weldon got on the radio. "Body out in Madaket," he said. "Send a wagon."

"You might need more than one," said Sara; she pointed to three dabs of color further up the road. She was very pale, and she squeezed Peter's hand so hard that she left white imprints on his skin.

Over the next twenty-five minutes they found eighteen bodies: broken, mutilated, several pierced by harpoons or fragments of bone. Peter would not have believed that the human form could be reduced to such grotesque statements, and though he was horrified, nauseated, he became increasingly numbed by what he saw. Odd thoughts flocked to his brain, most persistent among them being that the violence had been done partly for his benefit. It was a sick, nasty idea, and he tried to dismiss it; but after a while he began to consider it in light of other thoughts that had lately been striking him out of the blue. The manuscript of *How The Wind Spoke At Madaket*, for instance. As improbable as it sounded, it was hard to escape the conclusion that the wind had been seeding all this in his brain. He didn't want to believe it, yet there it was, as believable as anything else that had happened. And given that, was his latest thought any less believable? He was beginning to understand the progression of events, to understand it with the same sudden clarity that had helped him solve the problems of his book, and he wished very much that he could have obeyed his premonition and not touched the combs. Until then the elemental had not been sure of him; it had been nosing around him like—as Sally described it—a big, stupid animal, sensing something familiar about him but unable to remember what. And when he had found the combs, when he had opened the container, there must have been some kind of circuit closed, a flashpoint sparked between his power and Gabriela Pascual's and the elemental had made the connection. He recalled how excited it had seemed, darting back and forth beyond the borders of the aggregate.

As they turned back onto Tennessee Avenue, where a small group of townfolk were covering bodies with blankets, Weldon got on the radio again, interrupting Peter's chain of logic. "Where the hell are them ambulances?" he snapped.

"Sent 'em a half hour ago," came the reply. "Shoulda been there by now."

Weldon cast a grim look at Peter and Sara. "Try 'em on the radio," he told the operator.



A few minutes later the report came that none of the ambulances were answering their radios. Weldon told his people to stay put, that he'd check it out himself. As they turned off Tennessee Avenue onto the Nantucket road, the sun broke through the overcast, flooding the landscape in a thin yellow light and warming the interior of the car. The light seemed to be illuminating Peter's weaknesses, making him realize how tense he was, how his muscles ached with the poisons of adrenaline and fatigue. Sara leaned against him, her eyes closed, and the pressure of her body acted to shore him up, to give him a burst of vitality.

Weldon kept the speed at thirty, glancing left and right, but nothing was out of the ordinary. Deserted streets, houses with blank-looking windows. Many of the homes in Madaket were vacant, and the occupants of many of the rest were away at work or off on errands. About two miles out of town, as they crested a low rise just beyond the dump, they spotted the ambulances. Weldon pulled onto the shoulder, letting the engine idle, and stared at the sight. Four ambulances were strewn across the black top, forming an effective roadblock a hundred feet away. One had been flipped over on its roof like a dead white bug; another had crashed into a light pole and was swathed in electrical lines whose broken ends were sticking in through the driver's window, humping and writhing and sparking. The other two had been smashed together and were burning; transparent licks of flame warped the air above their blackened husks. But the wrecked ambulances were not the reason that Weldon had stopped so far away, why they sat silent and hopeless. To the right of the road was a field of bleached weeds and grasses, an Andrew Wyeth field glowing yellow in the pale sun, figured by a few stunted oaks and extending to a hill overlooking the sea, where three gray houses were posed against a faded blue sky. Though only fitful breezes played about the squad car, the field was registering the passage of heavy winds; the grasses were rippling, eddying, bending and swaying in contrary directions, as if thousands of low-slung animals were scampering through them to and fro, and this rippling was so constant, so furious, it seemed that the shadows of the clouds passing overhead were standing still and the land was flowing away. The sound of the wind was a mournful, whistling rush. Peter was entranced. The scene had a fey power that weighed upon him, and he had trouble catching his breath.

"Let's go," said Sara tremulously. "Let's..." She stared past Peter, a look of fearful comprehension forming on her face.

The wind had begun to roar. Less than thirty feet away a patch of grass had been flattened, and a man wearing an orderly's uniform was being lifted into the air, revolving slowly. His head flopped at

a ridiculous straw-man angle, and the front of his tunic was drenched with blood. The car shuddered in the turbulence.

Sara shrieked and clutched at Peter. Weldon tried to jam the gearshift into reverse, missed, and the car stalled. He twisted the key in the ignition. The engine sputtered, died, and went dead. The orderly continued to rise, assuming a vertical position. He spun faster and faster, blurring like an ice skater doing a fancy finish, and at the same time drifted closer to the car. Sara was screaming, and Peter wished he could scream, could do something to release the tightness in his chest. The engine caught. But before Weldon could put the car in gear, the wind subsided and the orderly fell onto the hood. Drops of blood sprinkled the windshield. He lay spreadeagled for a moment, his dead eyes staring at them. Then, with the obscene sluggishness of a snail retracting its foot, he slumped down onto the road, leaving a red smear across the white metal.

Weldon rested his head on the wheel, taking deep breaths. Peter cradled Sara in his arms. After a second Weldon leaned back, picked up the radio mike and thumbed the switch open. "Jack," he said. "This is Hugh. You copy?"

"Loud and clear, chief."

"We got us a problem out in Madaket." Weldon swallowed hard and gave a little twitch of his head. "I want you to set up a roadblock 'bout five miles from town. No closer. And don't let nobody through, y'understand?"

"What's happenin' out there, chief? Alice Cuddy called in and said somethin' 'bout a freak wind, but the phone went dead and I couldn't get her back."

"Yeah, we had us some wind." Weldon exchanged a glance with Peter. "But the main problem's a chemical spill. It's under control for now, but you keep everybody away. Madaket's in quarantine."

"You need some help?"

"I need you to do what I told you! Get on the horn and call everyone livin' 'tween the roadblock and Madaket. Tell 'em to head for Nantucket as quick as they can. Put the word on the radio, too."

"What 'bout folks comin' from Madaket? Do I let 'em through?"

"Won't be nobody comin' that way," said Weldon.

Silence. "Chief, you okay?"

"Hell yes!" Weldon switched off.

"Why didn't you tell them?" asked Peter.

"Don't want 'em thinkin' I'm crazy and comin' out to check on me," said Weldon. "Ain't no point in them dyin', too." He shifted into reverse. "I'm gonna tell everyone to get in their cellars and wait this damn thing out. Maybe we can figure out somethin' to do. But

first I'll take you home and let Sara get some rest."

"I'm all right," she said, lifting her head from Peter's chest.

"You'll feel better after a rest," he said, forcing her head back down: it was a act of tenderness, but also he did not want her to catch sight of the field. Dappled with cloud shadow; glowing palely; some quality of light different from that which shone upon the squad car; it seemed at a strange distance from the road, a view into an alternate universe where things were familiar yet not quite the same. The grasses were rippling more furiously than ever, and every so often a column of yellow stalks would whirl high into the air and scatter, as if an enormous child were running through the field, ripping up handfuls of them to celebrate his exuberance.

"I'm not sleepy," Sara complained; she still hadn't regained her color, and one of her eyelids had developed a tic.

Peter sat beside her on the bed. "There's nothing you can do, so why not rest?"

"What are you going to do?"

"I thought I'd have another go at the combs."

The idea distressed her. He started to explain why he had to, but instead bent and kissed her on the forehead. "I love you," he said. The words slipped out so easily that he was amazed. It had been a very long time since he had spoken them to anyone other than a memory.

"You don't have to tell me that just because things look bad," she said, frowning.

"Maybe that's why I'm telling you now," he said. "But I don't believe it's a lie."

She gave a dispirited laugh. "You don't sound very confident."

He thought it over. "I was in love with someone once," he said, "and that relationship colored my view of love. I guess I believed that it always had to happen the same way. A nuclear strike. But I'm beginning to understand it can be different, that you can build toward the sound and the fury."

"It's nice to hear," she said, and then, after a pause, "but you're still in love with her, aren't you?"

"I still think about her, but..." He shook his head. "I'm trying to put it behind me, and maybe I'm succeeding. I had a dream about her this morning."

She arched an eyebrow. "Oh?"

"It wasn't sweet dream," he said. "She was telling me how she'd cemented over her feelings for me. 'All that's left,' she said, 'is this little hard place on my breast.' And she told me that sometimes it moved around, twitched, and she showed me. I could see the damn

thing jumping underneath her blouse, and when I touched it—she wanted me to—it was unbelievably hard. Like a pebble lodge beneath her skin. A heart stone. That was all that was left of us. Just this piece of hardness. It pissed me off so much that I threw her on the floor. Then I woke up.” He scratched his beard, embarrassed by confession. “It was the first time I’ve ever had a violent thought about her.”

Sara stared at him, expressionless.

“I don’t know if it’s meaningful,” he said lamely. “But it seemed so.”

She remained silent. Her stare made him feel guilty for having had the dream, sorry that he had mentioned it.

“I don’t dream about her very much,” he said.

“It’s not important,” she said.

“Well.” He stood. “Try and get some sleep, okay?”

She reached for his hand. “Peter?”

“Yeah?”

“I love you. But you knew that, right?”

It hurt him to see how hesitantly she said it, because he knew that he was to blame for her hesitancy. He bent down and kissed her again. “Sleep,” he said. “We’ll talk about it later.”

He closed the door behind him gently. Mills was sitting at the table, gazing out at Sconset Sally, who was pacing the yard, her lips moving, waving her arms, as if arguing with an invisible playmate. “That ol’ gal sure’s gone down these last years,” said Mills. “Used to be sharp as a tack, but she’s actin’ pretty crazy now.”

“Can’t blame her,” said Peter, sitting down across from Mills. “I’m feeling pretty crazy myself.”

“So.” Mills tamped tobacco into the bowl of his pipe. “You got a line on what this thing is?”

“Maybe it’s the Devil.” Peter leaned against the wall. “I don’t really know, but I’m starting to think that Gabriela Pascual was right about it being an animal.”

Mills chomped on the stem of his pipe and fished in his pocket for a lighter. “How’s that?”

“Like I said, I don’t really know for sure, but I’ve been getting more and more sensitized to it ever since I found the combs. At least it seems that way. As if the connection between us were growing stronger.” Peter spotted a book of matches tucked under his sugar bowl and slid them across to Mills. “I’m beginning to have insights about it. When we were out on the road just now, I felt that it was exhibiting an animal trait. Staking out territory. Protecting it from invaders. Look who it’s attacked. Ambulances, bicyclists. People who

were entering its territory. It attacked us when we visited the aggregate."

"But it didn't kill us," said Mills.

The logical response to Mills' statement surfaced from Peter's thoughts, but he didn't want to admit to it and shunted it aside. "Maybe I'm wrong," he said.

"Well, if it is an animal, then it can take a hook. All we got to do is find its mouth." Mills grunted laughter, lit his pipe and puffed bluish smoke. "After you been out on the water a coupla weeks, you can feel when something strange is hard by ...even if you can't see it. I ain't no psychic, but seems to me I brushed past this thing once or twice."

Peter glanced up at him. Though Mills was a typical bar-room creature, an old salt with a supply of exotic tales, every now and then Peter could sense a kind of specific gravity about him, the kind that accrues to those who have spent time in the solitudes. "You don't seem afraid," he said.

"Oh, don't I?" Mills chuckled. "I'm afraid. I'm just too old to be runnin' 'round in circles 'about it."

The door flew open, and Sally came in. "Hot in here," she said; she went to the stove and laid a finger against it. "Hmph! Must be all this shit I'm wearin'." She plumped herself down beside Mills, squirmed into a comfortable position and squinted at Peter. "God-damn wind won't have me," she said. "It wants you."

Peter was startled. "What do you mean?"

Sally pursed her lips as if she had tasted something sour. "It would take me if you wasn't here, but you're too strong. I can't figure a way 'round that."

"Leave the boy alone," said Mills.

"Can't." Sally glowered at him. "He's got to do it."

"You know what she's talkin' 'about?" asked Mills.

"Hell, yes! He knows! And if he don't, all he's got to do is go talk to it. You understand me, boy. It wants *you*."

An icy fluid squirted down Peter's spine. "Like Gabriela," he said. "Is that what you mean?"

"Go on," said Sally. "Talk to it." She pointed a bony finger at the door. "Just take a stand out there, and it'll come to you."

Behind the cottage, walled off by the spread of two Japanese pines and a tool shed, was a field that the previous tenant had used for a garden. Peter had let it go to seed, and the entire plot was choked with weeds and litter: gas cans, rusty nails, a plastic toy truck, the decaying hide of a softball, cardboard scraps, this and more resting

upon a mat of dessicated vines. and thus seemed an appropriate p the wind...if such a communion we imagination. Which Peter hoped i and it had grown colder. Silver bl blackish-gray clouds scudding ove pour off the sea. He could detect n ning to feel foolish, thinking about smelling breeze rippled across his it: it was acting independent of the fingers to his lips, his eyes, fondlin in trying to know your shape in h pried under the pocket flaps of his ching for cheese; it frittered with l ween the legs, shriveling his groin a his body.

He did not quite understand he had an image of the process as be against your hand and transmit a st a mild stinging and popping. S knowledge, doubtless by means of

as a man might look upon a clever toy: something to be cherished for a while, then neglected, then forgotten.

Then lost.

Sara waked at twilight from a dream of suffocation. She sat bolt upright, covered with sweat, her chest heaving. After a moment she calmed herself and swung her legs onto the floor and sat staring into space. In the half-light the dark grain of the boards looked like a pattern of animal faces emerging from the wall; out the window she could see shivering bushes and banks of running clouds. Still feeling sluggish, she went into the front room, intending to wash her face; but the bathroom door was locked and "Sconset Sally cawed at her from inside. Mills was snoozing on the sofa bunk, and Hugh Weldon was sitting at the table, sipping a cup of coffee; a cigarette smouldered in the saucer, and that struck her as funny: she had known Hugh all her life and had never seen him smoke.

"Where's Peter?" she asked.

"Out back," he said moodily. "Buncha damn foolishness if you ask me."

"What is?"

He gave a snort of laughter. "Sally says he's talkin' to the god-damn wind."

Sara felt as if her heart had constricted. "What do you mean?"

"Beats the hell outta me," said Weldon. "Just more of Sally's nonsense." But when their eyes met she could sense his hopelessness and fear.

She broke for the door. Weldon grabbed at her arm, but she shook free and headed for the Japanese pines back of the cottage. She brushed aside the branches and stopped short, suddenly afraid. The bending and swaying of the weeds revealed a slow circular passage of wind, as if the belly of a great beast were dragging across them, and at the center of the field stood Peter. His eyes were closed, his mouth open and strands of hair were floating above his head like the hair of a drowned man. The sight stabbed into her, and forgetting her fear, she ran toward him, calling his name. She had covered half the distance between them when a blast of wind smashed her to the ground.

Stunned and disoriented, she tried to get to her feet, but the wind smacked her flat again, pressing her into the damp earth. As had happened out on the aggregate, garbage was rising from the weeds. Scraps of plastic, rusty nails, a yellowed newspaper, rags, and, directly overhead, a large chunk of kindling. She was still dazed, yet she saw with peculiar clarity how the bottom of the chunk was splintered and

flecked with whitish mold. It was quivering, as if the hand that held it were barely able to restrain its fury. And then, as she realized it was about to plunge down, to jab out her eyes and pulp her skull, Peter dived on top of her. His weight knocked the breath out of her, but she heard the piece of kindling *thunk* against the back of his head; she sucked in air and pushed at him, rolling him away, and came to her knees. He was dead-pale.

"Is he all right?"

It was Mills, lumbering across the field. Behind him, Weldon had hold of 'Sconset Sally, who was struggling to escape. Mills had come perhaps a third of the way when the garbage, which had fallen back into the weeds, once more was lifted into the air, swirling, jiggling, and—as the wind produced one of its powerful gusts—hurtling toward him. For a second he was surrounded by storm of cardboard and plastic; then this fell away, and he took a staggering step forward. A number of dark dots speckled his face. Sara thought at first they were clots of dirt. Then blood seeped out around them. They were rusty nailheads. Piercing his brow, his cheeks, pinning his upper lip to his gum. He gave no cry. His eyes bulged, his knees buckled, he did an ungainly pirouette and pitched into the weeds.

Sara watched dully as the wind fluttered about Hugh Weldon and Sally, belling their clothes; it passed beyond them, lashing the pine boughs and vanishing. She spotted the hump of Mills' belly through the weeds. A tear seemed to be carving a cold groove in her cheek. She hiccuped, and thought what a pathetic reaction to death that was. Another hiccup, and another. She couldn't stop. Each successive spasm made her weaker, more unsteady, as if she were spitting up tiny fragments of her soul.

## 7

As darkness fell, the wind poured through the streets of the village, playing its tricks with the living, the inanimate, and the dead. It was indiscriminate, the ultimate free spirit doing its thing, and yet one might have ascribed a touch of frustration to its actions. Over Warren's Landing it crumpled a seagull into a bloody rag, and near the mouth of Hither Creek it scattered field mice into the air. It sent a spare tire rolling down the middle of Tennessee Avenue and skied shingles from the roof of the AHAB-ITAT. For a while it flowed about aimlessly; then, increasing to tornado-force, it uprooted a



Japanese pine, just yanked it from the ground, dangling huge black root balls, and chucked it like a spear through the side of a house across the street. It repeated the process with two oaks and a hawthorn. Finally it began to blast holes in the walls of the houses and snatch the wriggling creatures inside. It blew off old Julia Stackpole's cellar door and sailed it down into the shelves full of preserves behind which she was hiding; it gathered the broken glass into a hurricane of knives that slashed her arms, her face, and—most pertinently—her throat. It found even older George Coffin (who wasn't about to hide, because in his opinion Hugh Weldon was a damned fool) standing in his kitchen, having just stepped back in after lighting his barbecue; it swept up the coals and hurled them at him with uncanny accuracy. Over the space of a half-hour it killed twenty-one people and flung their bodies onto their lawns, leaving them to bleed pale in the accumulating dusk. Its fury apparently abated, it dissipated to a breeze and—zipping through shrubs and pine boughs—it fled back to the cottage, where something it now wanted was waiting in the yard.

## 8

'Sconset Sally sat on the woodpile, sucking at a bottle of beer that she'd taken from Peter's refrigerator. She was as mad as a wet hen, because she had a plan—a good plan—and that brainless wonder Hugh Weldon wouldn't hear it, wouldn't listen to a damn word she said. Stuck on being a hero, he was.

The sky had deepened to indigo, and a big lopsided silver moon was leering at her from over the roof of the cottage. She didn't like its eye on her and she spat toward it. The elemental caught the gob of spit and spun it around high in the air, making it glisten oysterlike. Fool thing! Half monster, half a walloping, invisible dog. It reminded her of that outsized old male of hers, Rommel. One second he'd be going for the mailman's throat, and the next he'd be on his back and wagging his paws, begging for a treat. She screwed her bottle into the grass so it wouldn't spill and picked up a stick of kindling. "Here," she said, and shied the stick. "Fetch." The elemental caught the stick and juggled it for a few seconds, then let it fall at her feet. Sally chuckled. "Me'n you might get along," she told the air. "Cause neither one of us gives a shit!" The beer bottle lifted from the grass. She made a grab for it and missed. "Goddamn it!" she yelled. "Bring that back!" The bottle sailed to a height of about twenty feet and

tipped over; the beer spilled out, collected in half a dozen large drops that—one by one—exploded into spray, showering her. Sputtering, she jumped to her feet and started to wipe her face; but the element knocked her back down. A trickle of fear welled up inside her. The bottle still hovered above her; after a second it plopped into the grass, and the elemental curled around her, fidgeting with her hair, her collar, slithering inside her raincoat; then, abruptly, as if something else had attracted its attention, it was gone. She saw the grass flatten as it passed over, moving toward the street. She propped herself against the woodpile and finished wiping her face; she spotted Hugh Weldon through the window, pacing, and her anger was rekindled. Thought he was so goddamn masterful, did he? He didn't know piss about the elemental, and there he was, laughing at her plan.

Well, screw him!

He'd find out soon enough that his plan wouldn't work, that hers was the reasonable one, the surefire one.

A little scary, maybe, but surefire all the same.

## 9

It had come full dark by the time Peter regained consciousness. He moved his head, and the throbbing nearly caused him to black out. He lay still, getting his bearings. Moonlight spilled through the bedroom window, and Sara was leaning beside it, her blouse glowing a phosphorescent white. From the tilt of her head he judged that she was listening to something, and he soon distinguished an unusual pattern to the wind: five notes followed by a glissando, which led to a repetition of the passage. It was a heavy, angry music, an ominous hook that might have been intended to signal the approach of a villain. Shortly thereafter the pattern broke into a thousand skirling notes, as if the wind were being forced through the open stops of a chorus of flutes. Then another passage, this of seven notes, more rapid but equally ominous. A chill, helpless feeling stole over Peter, like the drawing of a morgue sheet. That breathy music was being played for him. It was swelling in volume, as if—and he was certain this was the case—the elemental was heralding his awakening, was once again sure of his presence. It was impatient, and it would not wait for him much longer. Each note drilled that message home. The thought of being alone with it on the open sea terrified him. Yet he had no choice. There was no way to fight it, and it would simply keep on killing

until he obeyed. If it weren't for the others he would refuse to go; he would rather die here than submit to that harrowing, unnatural relationship. Or was it unnatural? It occurred to him that the history of the wind and Gabriela Pascual had a great deal in common with the histories of many human relationships. Desiring; obtaining; neglecting; forgetting. It might be that the elemental was some sort of core existence, that at the heart of every relationship lay a howling emptiness, a chaotic music.

"Sara," he said, wanting to deny it.

The moonlight seemed to wrap around her as she turned. She came to sit beside him. "How are you feeling?"

"Wozy." He gestured toward the window. "How long's that been going on?"

"It just started," she said. "It's punched holes in a lot of the houses. Hugh and Sally were out a while ago. More people are dead." She brushed a lock of hair from his forehead. "But..."

"But what?"

"We have a plan."

The wind was playing eerie triplets, an agitated whistling that set Peter's teeth on edge. "It better be a doozy," he said.

"Actually, it's Hugh's plan," she said. "He noticed something out in the field. The instant you touched me, the wind withdrew from us. If it hadn't, if it had hurled that piece of wood at you instead of letting it drop, you would have died. And it didn't want that...at least that's what Sally says."

"She's right. Did she tell you what it does want?"

"Yes." She looked away, and her eyes caught the moonlight; they were teary. "Anyway, we think it was confused, that when we're close together it can't tell us apart. And since it doesn't want to hurt you or Sally, Hugh and I are safe as long as we maintain proximity. If Mills had just stayed where he was..."

"Mills?"

She told him.

After a moment, still seeing Mills' nail-studded face in his mind's eye, he asked, "What's the plan?"

"I'm going to ride in the jeep with Sally, and you're going with Hugh. We'll drive toward Nantucket, and when we reach the dump...you know that dirt road there that leads off into the moors?"

"The one that leads to Altar Rock? Yeah."

"At that point you'll jump into the jeep with us, and we'll head for Altar Rock. Hugh will keep going toward Nantucket. Since it seems to be trying to isolate this end of the island, he figures it'll come after him and we might be able to get beyond its range, and

with both of us heading in different directions, we might be able to confuse it enough so that it won't react quickly, and he'll be able to escape, too." She said all this in a rush that reminded Peter of the way a teenager would try to convince her parents to let her stay out late, blurting out the good reasons before they had time to raise any objections.

"You might be right about it not being able to tell us apart when we're close to each other," he said. "God knows how it senses things, and that seems plausible. But the rest is stupid. We don't know whether its territoriality is limited to this end of the island. And what if it does lose track of me and Sally? What's it going to do then? Just blow away? Somehow I doubt it. It might head for Nantucket and do what it's done here."

"Sally says she has a back-up plan."

"Christ, Sara!" Gingerly, he eased up into a sitting position. "Sally's nuts. She doesn't have a clue."

"Well, what choice do we have?" Her voice broke. "You can't go with it."

"You think I want to? Jesus!"

The bedroom door opened, and Weldon appeared silhouetted in a blur of orange light that hurt Peter's eyes. "Ready to travel?" said Weldon. 'Sconset Sally was at his rear, muttering, humming, producing a human static.

Peter swung his legs off the bed. "This is nuts, Weldon." He stood and steadied himself on Sara's shoulder. "You're just going to get killed." He gestured toward the window and the constant music of the wind. "Do you think you can outrun that in a squad car?"

"Mebbe this plan ain't worth a shit..." Weldon began.

"You got that right!" said Peter. "If you want to confuse the elemental, why not split me and Sally up? One goes with you, the other with Sara. That way at least there's some logic to this."

"Way I figure it," said Weldon, hitching up his pants, "it ain't your job to be riskin' yourself. It's mine. If Sally, say, goes with me, you're right, that'd confuse it. But so might this. Seems to me it's as eager to keep us normal people in line as it is to run off with freaks like you 'n Sally."

"What..."

"Shut up!" Weldon eased a step closer. "Now if my way don't work, you try it yours. And if *that* don't do it, then you can go for a cruise with the damn thing. But we don't have no guarantees it's gonna let anybody live no matter what you do."

"No, but..."

"No buts about it! This is my bailiwick, and we're gonna do what

I say. If it don't work, well, then you can do what you have to. But 'til that happens..."

"'Til that happens you're going to keep on making an ass of yourself," said Peter. "Right? Man, all day you've been looking for a way to assert your fucking authority! You don't have any authority in this situation. Don't you understand?"

Weldon went jaw to jaw with him. "Okay," he said. "You go on out there, Mr. Ramey. Go ahead. Just march on out there. You can use Mills' boat, or if you want something bigger, how 'bout Sally's." He snapped a glance back at Sally. "That okay with you, Sally?" She continued muttering, humming, and nodded her head. "See!" Weldon turned to Peter. "She don't mind. So you go ahead. You draw that son of a bitch away from us if you can." He hitched up his pants and exhaled; his breath smelled like a coffee cup full of cigarette butts. "But if it was me, I'd be 'bout ready to try anything else."

Peter's legs felt rooted to the floor. He realized that he had been using anger to muffle fear, and he did not know if he could muster up the courage to take a walk out into the wind, to sail away into the terror and nothingness that Gabriela Pascual had faced.

Sara slipped her hand through his arm. "Please, Peter," she said. "It can't hurt to try."

Weldon backed off a step. "Nobody's blamin' you for bein' scared, Mr. Ramey," he said. "I'm scared myself. But this is the only way I can figure to do my job."

"You're going to die." Peter had trouble swallowing. "I can't let you do that."

"You ain't got nothin' to say 'bout it," said Weldon. "'Cause you got no more authority than me. 'Less you can tell that thing to leave us be. Can you?"

Sara's fingers tightened on Peter's arm, but relaxed when he said, "No."

"Then we'll do 'er my way." Weldon rubbed his hands together in what seemed to Peter hearty anticipation. "Got your keys, Sally?"

"Yeah," she said, exasperated; she moved close to Peter and put a birdclaw hand on his wrist. "Don't worry, Peter. This don't work, I got somethin' up my sleeve. We'll pull a fast one on that devil." She cackled and gave a little whistle, like a parrot chortling over a piece of fruit.

As they drove slowly along the streets of Madaket, the wind sang through the ruined houses, playing passages that sounded mournful and questioning, as if it were puzzled by the movements of the jeep

and the squad car. The light of a three-quarter moon illuminated the destruction: gaping holes in the wall, denuded bushes, toppled trees. One of the houses had been given a surprised look, an O of a mouth where the door had been, flanked by two shattered windows. Litter covered the lawns. Flapping paperbacks, clothing, furniture food, toys. And bodies. In the silvery light their flesh was as pale as Swiss cheese, the wounds dark. They didn't seem real; they might have been a part of a gruesome environment created by an avant-garde sculptor. A carving knife skittered along the blacktop, and for a moment Peter thought it would jump into the air and hurtle toward him. He glanced over at Weldon to see how he was taking it all. Wooden Indian profile, eyes on the road. Peter envied him his pose of duty; he wished he had such a role to play, something that would brace him up, because every shift in the wind made him feel frail and rattled.

They turned onto the Nantucket road, and Weldon straightened in his seat. He checked the rear view mirror, keeping an eye on Sally and Sara, and held the speed at twenty-five. "Okay," he said as they neared the dump and the road to Altar Rock. "I ain't gonna come to a full stop, so when I give the word you move it."

"All right," said Peter, he took hold of the door handle and let out a calming breath. "Good luck."

"Yeah." Weldon sucked at his teeth. "Same to you."

The speed indicator dropped to fifteen, to ten, to five, and the moonlit landscape inched past.

"Go!" shouted Weldon.

Peter went. He heard the squad car squeal off as he sprinted toward the jeep; Sara helped haul him into the back, and then they were veering onto the dirt road. Peter grabbed the frame of Sara's seat, bouncing up and down. The thickets that covered the moors grew close to the road, and branches whipped the sides of the jeep. Sally was hunched over the wheel, driving like a maniac; she sent them skipping over potholes, swerving around tight corners, grinding up the little hills. There was no time to think, only to hold on and be afraid, to await the inevitable appearance of the elemental. Fear was a metallic taste in Peter's mouth; it was in the white gleam of Sara's eyes as she glanced back at him and the smears of moonlight that coursed along the hood; it was in every breath he took, every trembling shadow he saw. But by the time they reached Altar Rock, after fifteen minutes or so, he had begun to hope, to half-believe, that Weldon's plan had worked.

The rock was almost dead-center of the island, its highest point. It was a barren hill atop which stood a stone where the Indians had

once conducted human sacrifices—a bit of history that did no good whatsoever for Peter's nerves. From the crest you could see for miles over the moors, and the rumpled pattern of depressions and small hills had the look of a sea that had been magically transformed to leaves during a moment of fury. The thickets—bayberry and such—were dusted to a silvery-green by the moonlight, and the wind blew steadily, giving no evidence of unnatural forces.

Sara and Peter climbed from the jeep, followed after a second by Sally. Peter's legs were shaky and he leaned against the hood; Sara leaned back beside him, her hip touching his. He caught the scent of her hair. Sally peered toward Madaket. She was still muttering, and Peter made out some of the words:

"Stupid...never would listen to me...never would...son of a bitch...keep it to my goddamn self..."

Sara nudged him. "What do you think?"

"All we can do is wait," he said.

"We're going to be all right," she said firmly; she rubbed the heel of her right hand against the knuckles of her left. It seemed the kind of childish gesture intended to insure good luck, and it inspired him to tenderness. He pulled her into an embrace. Standing there, gazing past her head over the moors, he had an image of them as being the standard lovers on the cover of a paperback, clinging together on a lonely hill, with all probability spread out around them. A corny way of looking at things, yet he felt the truth of it, the dizzying immersion that a paperback lover was supposed to feel. It was not as clear a feeling as he had once had, but perhaps clarity was no longer possible for him. Perhaps all his past clarity had simply been an instance of faulty perception, a flash of immaturity, an adolescent misunderstanding of what was possible. But whether or not that was the case, self-analysis would not solve his confusion. That sort of thinking blinded you to the world, made you disinclined to take risks. It was similar to what happened to academics, how they became so committed to their theories that they began to reject facts to the contrary, to grow conservative in their judgments and deny the inexplicable, the magical. If there was magic in the world—and he knew there was—you could only approach it by abandoning the constraints of logic and lessons learned. For more than a year he had forgotten this and had constructed defenses against magic; now in a single night they had been blasted away, and at a terrible cost he had been made capable of risking himself again, of hoping.

Then he noticed something that wasted hope.

Another voice had been added to the natural flow of wind from the ocean, and in every direction, as far as the eye could see, the

moon-silvered thickets were rippling, betraying the presence of far more wind than was evident atop the hill. He pushed Sara away. She followed his gaze and put a hand to her mouth. The immensity of the elemental stunned Peter. They might have been standing on a crag in the midst of a troubled sea, one that receded into an interstellar dark. For the first time, despite his fear, he had an apprehension of the elemental's beauty, of the precision and intricacy of its power. One moment it could be a tendril of breeze, capable of delicate manipulations, and the next it could become an entity the size of a city. Leaves and branches—like flecks of black space—were streaming up from the thickets, forming into columns. Six of them, at regular intervals about Altar Rock, maybe a hundred yards away. The sound of the wind evolved into a roar as they thickened and grew higher. And they grew swiftly. Within seconds the tops of columns were lost in darkness. They did not have the squat, conical shapes of tornadoes, nor did they twist and jab down their tails; they merely swayed, slender and graceful and menacing. In the moonlight their whirling was almost undetectable and they looked to be made of shining ebony, like six enormous savages poised to attack. They began moving toward the hill. Splintered bushes exploded upward from their bases, and the roaring swelled into a dissonant chord: the sound of a hundred harmonicas being blown at once. Only much, much louder.

The sight of 'Sconset Sally scuttling for the jeep waked Peter from his daze; he pushed Sara into the rear seat and climbed in beside Sally. Though the engine was running, it was drowned out by the wind. Sally drove even less cautiously than before; the island was crisscrossed by narrow dirt roads, and it seemed to Peter that they almost crashed on every one of them. Skidding sideways through a flurry of bushes, flying over the crests of hills, diving down steep slopes. The thickets grew too high in most places for him to see much, but the fury of the wind was all around them and once, as they passed a place where the bushes had been burned off, he caught a glimpse of an ebony column about fifty yards away. It was traveling alongside them, he realized. Harrowing them, running them to and fro. Peter lost track of where they were, and he could not believe that Sally had any better idea. She was trying to do the impossible, to drive out of the wind, which was everywhere, and her lips were drawn back in a grimace of fear. Suddenly—they had just turned east—she slammed on the brakes. Sara flew halfway into the front seat, and if Peter had not been braced he might have gone through the windshield. Further along the road one of the columns had taken a stand, blocking their path. It looked like God, he thought. An ebony tower reaching from the earth to the sky, spraying clouds of dust and plant litter



from its bottom. And it was moving toward them. Slowly. A few feet per second. But definitely on the move. The jeep was shaking, and the roar seemed to be coming from the ground beneath them, from the air, from Peter's body, as if the atoms of things were all grinding together. Frozen-faced, Sally wrangled with the gearshift. Sara screamed, and Peter, too, screamed as the windshield was sucked out of its frame and whirled off. He braced himself against the dash, but his arms were weak and with a rush of shame he felt his bladder go. The column was less than a hundred feet away, a great spinning pillar of darkness. He could see how the material inside it aligned itself into tightly packed rings like the segments of a worm. The air was syrupy, hard to breathe. And then, miraculously, they were swerving away from it, away from the roaring, backing along the road. They turned a corner, and Sally got the jeep going forward; she sent them grinding up a largish hill... and braked. And let her head drop onto the steering wheel in an attitude of despair. They were once again at Altar Rock.

And Hugh Weldon was waiting for them.

He was sitting with his head propped against the boulder that gave the place its name. His eyes were filled with shadows. His mouth was open, and his chest rose and fell. Labored breathing, as if he had just run a long way. There was no sign of the squad car. Peter tried to call to him, but his tongue was stuck to his palate and all that came out was a strangled grunt. He tried again.

"Weldon!"

Sara started to sob, and Sally gasped. Peter didn't know what had frightened them and didn't care; for him the process of thought had been thinned down to following one track at a time. He climbed from the jeep and went over to the chief. "Weldon," he said again.

Weldon sighed.

"What happened?" Peter knelt beside him and put a hand on his shoulder; he heard a hiss and felt a tremor pass through the body.

Weldon's right eye began to bulge. Peter lost his balance and sat back hard. Then the eye popped out and dropped into the dust. With a high-pitched whistling, wind and blood sprayed from the empty socket. Peter fell backwards, scrabbling at the dirt in an effort to put distance between himself and Weldon. The corpse toppled onto its side, its head vibrating as the wind continued to pour out, boiling up dust beneath the socket. There was a dark smear marking the spot on the boulder where the head had rested.

Until his heart rate slowed, Peter lay staring at the moon, as bright and distant as wish. He heard the roaring of the wind from all sides and realized that it was growing louder, but he didn't want to admit

to it. Finally, though, he got to his feet and gazed out across the moors.

It was as if he were standing at the center of an unimaginably large temple, one forested with dozens upon dozens of shiny black pillars rising from a dark green floor. The nearest of them were about a hundred yards away, and those were unmoving; but as Peter watched, others farther off began to slew back and forth, gliding in and out of the stationary ones, like dancing cobras. There was a fear in the air, a pulse of heat and energy, and this as much as the alienness of the sight was what transfixed him and held him immobile. He found that he had gone beyond fear. You could no more hide from the elemental than you could from God. It would lead him onto the sea to die, and its power was so compelling that he almost acknowledged its right to do this. He climbed into the jeep. Sara looked beaten. Sally touched his leg with a palsied hand.

"You can use my boat," she said.

On the way back to Madaket, Sara sat with her hands clasped in her lap, outwardly calm but inwardly turbulent. Thoughts fired across her brain so quickly that they left only partial impressions, and those were seared away by lightning strokes of terror. She wanted to say something to Peter, but words seemed inadequate to all she was feeling. At one point she decided to go with him, but the decision sparked a sudden resentment. He didn't love her! Why should she sacrifice herself for him? Then, realizing that he was sacrificing himself for her, that he did love her or that at least this was an act of love, she decided that if she went it would make his act meaningless. That decision caused her to question whether or not she was using his sacrifice to obscure her true reason for staying behind: her fear. And what about the quality of her feelings for him? Were they so uncertain that fear could undermine them? In a blaze of irrationality she saw that he was pressuring her to go with him, to prove her love, something she had never asked him to do. What right did he have? With half her mind she understood the unreasonableness of these thoughts, yet she couldn't stop thinking them. She felt all her emotions winnowing, leaving her hollow...like Hugh Weldon, with only the wind inside him, propping him up, giving him the semblance of life. The grotesqueness of the image caused her to shrink further inside herself, and she just sat there, growing dim and empty, saying nothing.

"Buck up," said Sally out of the blue, and patted Peter's leg. "We got one thing left to try." And then, with what seemed to Sara an irrational good cheer, she added: "But if that don't work the boat's

got fishin' tackle and a coupla cases of cherry brandy on board. I was too damn drunk to unload 'em yesterday. Cherry brandy be better'n water for where you're headed."

Peter gave no reply.

As they entered the village, the elemental chased beside them, whirling up debris, scattering leaves, tossing things high into the air. Playing, thought Sara. It was playing. Frisking along like a happy pup, like a petulant child who'd gotten his way and now was all smiles. She was overwhelmed with hatred for it and she dug her nails into the seat cushion, wishing she had a way to hurt it. Then, as they passed Julia Stackpole's house, the corpse of Julia Stackpole sat up. Its bloody head hung down, its frail arms flapping. The entire body appeared to be vibrating, and with a horrid disjointed motion, amid a swirling of papers and trash, it went rolling over and over and came to rest against a broken chair. Sara shrank back into a corner of the seat, her breath ragged and shallow. A thin cloud swept free of the moon and the light measurably brightened, making the gray of the houses seem gauzy and immaterial; the holes in their sides looked real enough—black, cavernous—as if the walls and doors and windows had only been a façade concealing emptiness.

Sally parked next to a boathouse a couple of hundred yards north of Smith Point: a rickety wooden structure the size of a garage. Beyond it a stretch of calm back water was figured by a blaze of moonlight. "You gonna have to row out to the boat," Sally told Peter. "Oars are in here." She unlocked the door and flicked on a light. The inside of the place was as dilapidated as Sally herself. Raw boards; spiderwebs spanning between paint cans and busted lobster traps; a jumble of two-by-fours. Sally went stumping around, mumbling and kicking things, searching for the oars; her footsteps set the light bulb dangling from the roof to swaying, and the light slopped back and forth over the walls like dirty yellow water. Sara's legs were leaden. It was hard to move, and she thought maybe this was because there weren't any moves left. Peter took a few steps toward the center of the boathouse and stopped, looking lost. His hands twitched at his sides. She had the idea that his expression mirrored her own: slack, spiritless, with bruised crescents under his eyes. She moved, then. The dam that had been holding back her emotions burst, and her arms were around him, and she was telling him that she couldn't let him go alone, telling him half-sentences, phrases that didn't connect. "Sara," he said. "Jesus." He held her very tightly. The next second, though, she heard a dull *thunk* and he sagged against her, almost knocking her down, and slumped to the floor. Brandishing a two-by-four, Sally bent to him and struck again.

"What are you doing?" Sara screamed it and began to wrestle with Sally. Their arms locked, they waltzed around and around or a matter of seconds, the light bulb jiggling madly. Sally sputtered and fumed; spittle glistened on her lips. Finally, with a snarl, she shoved Sara away. Sara staggered back, tripped over Peter and fell sprawling beside him.

"Listen!" Sally cocked her head and pointed to the roof with the two-by-four. "Goddamn it! It's workin'!"

Sara came warily to her feet. "What are you talking about?"

Sally picked up her fisherman's hat, which had fallen off during the struggle, and squashed it down onto her head. "The wind, goddamn it! I told that stupid son of a bitch Hugh Weldon, but oh, no! He never listened to nobody."

The wind was rising and fading in volume, doing so with such a regular rhythm that Sara had the impression of a creature made of wind running frantically back and forth. Something splintered in the distance.

"I don't understand," said Sara.

"Unconscious is like dead to it," said Sally; she gestured at Peter with the board. "I knew it was so, 'cause after it did for Mills it came for me. It touched me up all over, and I could tell it'd have me, then. But that stupid bastard wouldn't listen. Had to do things his goddamn way!"

"It would have you?" Sara glanced down at Peter, who was unstirring, bleeding from the scalp. "You mean instead of Peter?"

"Course that's what I mean." Sally frowned. "Don't make no sense him goin'. Young man with all his future ahead. Now me..." She yanked at the lapel of her raincoat as if intending to throw herself away. "What I got to lose? A coupla years of bein' alone. I ain't eager for it, y'understand. But it don't make sense any other way. Tried to tell Hugh that, but he was stuck on bein' a goddamn hero."

Her bird-bright eyes glittered in the webbed flesh, and Sara had a perception of her that she had not had since childhood: the zany old spirit, half-mad but with one eye fixed on some corner of creation that nobody else could see. She remembered all the stories. Sally trying to signal the moon with a hurricane lamp; Sally rowing through a nor'easter to pluck six sailors off Whale Shoals; Sally passing out dead-drunk at the ceremony the Coast Guard had given in her honor; Sally loosing her dogs on the then-junior senator from Massachusetts when he had come to present her a medal. Crazy Sally. She suddenly seemed valuable to Sara.

"You can't..." she began, but broke off and stared at Peter.

"Can't not," said Sally, and clucked her tongue. "You see somebody

looks after my dogs."

Sara nodded.

"And you better check on Peter," said Sally. "See if I hit him too hard."

Sara started to comply but was struck by a thought. "Won't it know better this time? Peter was knocked out before. Won't it have learned?"

"I suppose it can learn," said Sally. "But it's real stupid, and I don't think it's figured this out." She gestured at Peter. "Go ahead. See if he's all right."

The hairs on Sara's neck prickled as she knelt beside Peter, and she was later to reflect that in the back of her mind she had known what was about to happen. But even so she was startled by the blow.

## 10

It wasn't until late the next afternoon that the doctors allowed Peter to have visitors other than the police. He was still suffering from dizziness and blurred vision, and mentally speaking he alternated between periods of relief and depression. Seeing in his mind's eye the mutilated bodies, the whirling black pillars. Tensing as the wind prowled along the hospital walls. In general he felt walled off from emotion, but when Sara came into the room those walls crumbled. He drew her down beside him and buried his face in her hair. They lay for a long time without speaking, and it was Sara who finally broke the silence.

"Do they believe you?" she asked. "I don't think they believe me."

"They don't have much choice," he said. "I just think they don't want to believe it."

After a moment she said, "Are you going away?"

He pulled back from her. She had never looked more beautiful. Her eyes were wide, her mouth drawn thin, and the strain of all that had happened to them seemed to have carved an unnecessary ounce of fullness from her face. "That depends on whether or not you'll go with me," he said. "I don't want to stay. Whenever the wind changes pitch every nerve in my body signals an air raid. But I won't leave you. I want to marry you."

Her reaction was not what he had expected. She closed her eyes and kissed him on the forehead—a motherly, understanding kiss; then she settled back on the pillow, gazing calmly at him.

"That was a proposal," he said. "Didn't you catch it?"

"Marriage?" She seemed perplexed by the idea.

"Why not? We're qualified." He grinned. "We both have concussions."

"I don't know," she said. "I love you, Peter, but..."

"But you don't trust me?"

"Maybe that's part of it," she said, annoyed. "I don't know."

"Look." He smoothed down her hair. "Do you know what really happened in the boathouse last night?"

"I'm not sure what you mean."

"I'll tell you. What happened was that an old woman gave her life so you and I could have a chance at something." She started to speak but he cut her off. "That's the bones of it. I admit the reality's a bit more murky. God knows why Sally did what she did. Maybe saving lives was a reflex of her madness, maybe she was tired of living. Maybe it just seemed a good idea at the time. And as for us, we haven't exactly been Romeo and Juliet. I've been confused, and I've confused you. And aside from whatever problems we might have as a couple, we have a lot to forget. Until you came in I was feeling shell-shocked, and that's a feeling that's probably going to last for a while. But like I said, the heart of the matter is that Sally died to give us a chance. No matter what her motives, what our circumstance, that's what happened. And we'd be fools to let that chance slip away." He traced the line of her cheekbone with a finger. "I love you. I've loved you for a long time and tried to deny it, to hold onto a dead issue. But that's all over."

"We can't make this sort of decision now," she murmured.

"Why not?"

"You said it yourself. You're shell-shock. So am I. And I don't know how I feel about...everything."

"Everything? You mean me?"

She made a non-committal noise, closed her eyes, and after a moment she said, "I need time to think."

In Peter's experience when women said they needed time to think nothing good ever came of it. "Jesus!" he said angrily. "Is this how it has to be between people? One approaches, the other avoids, and then they switch roles. Like insects whose mating instincts have been screwed up by pollution." He registered what he had said and had a flash-feeling of horror. "Come on, Sara! We're past that kind of dance, aren't we? It doesn't have to be marriage, but let's commit to something. Maybe we'll make a mess of it, maybe we'll end up boring each other. But let's try. It might not be any effort at all." He put his arms around her, brought her tight against him, and was

immersed in a cocoon of heat and weakness. He loved her, he realized, with an intensity that he had not believed he could recapture. His mouth had been smarter than his brain for once—either that or he had talked himself into it. The reasons didn't matter.

"For Christ's sake!" he said. "Marry me. Live with me. Do something with me!"

She was silent; her left hand moved gently over his hair. Light, distracted touches. Tucking a curl behind her ear, toying with his beard, smoothing his mustache. As if she were making him presentable. He remembered how that other long-ago woman had become increasingly silent and distracted and gentle in the days before she had dumped him.

"Damn it!" he said with a growing sense of helplessness. "Answer me!"

## 11

On the second night out 'Sconset Sally caught sight of a winking red light off her port bow. Some ship's riding light. It brought a tear to her eye, making her think of home. But she wiped the tear away with the back of her hand and had another slug of cherry brandy. The cramped wheelhouse of the lobster boat was cozy and relatively warm; beyond, the moonlit plain of the sea was rising in light swells. Even if you didn't have nowhere good to go, she thought, wheels and keels and wings gave a boost to your spirit. She laughed. Especially if you had a supply of cherry brandy. She had another slug. A breeze curled around her arm and tugged at the neck of the bottle. "Goddamn it!" she squawked. "Get away!" She batted at the air as if she could shoo away the elemental, and hugged the bottle to her breast. Wind uncoiled a length of rope on the deck behind her, and then she could hear it moaning about the hull. She staggered to the wheelhouse door. "Whoo-oo-ooh!" she sang, mocking it. "Don't be making your godawful noises at me, you sorry bastard! Go kill another goddamn fish if you want somethin' to do. Just leave me alone to my drinkin'."

Waves surged up on the port side. Big ones, like black teeth. Sally almost dropped the bottle in her surprise. Then she saw they weren't really waves but shapes of water made by the elemental. "You're losin' you touch, asshole!" she shouted. "I seen better'n that in the movies!" She slumped down beside the door, clutching the bottle. The word

"movies" conjured flashes of old films she'd seen, and she started singing songs from them. She did "Singin' In The Rain" and "Blue Moon" and "Love Me Tender." She knocked back swallows of brandy in between the verses, and when she felt primed enough she launched into her favorite. "The sound that you hear," she bawled, "is the sound of Sally! A joy to be heard for a thousand years." She belched. "The hills are alive with the sound of Sally..." She couldn't recall the next line, and that ended the concert.

The wind built to a howl around her, and her thoughts sank into a place where there were only dim urges and nerves fizzling and blood whinnying in her ears. Gradually she surfaced from it and found that her mood had become one of regret. Not about anything specific. Just general regrets. General Regrets. She pictured him as an old fogey with a white walrus mustache and a Gilbert-and-Sullivan uniform. Epaulets the size of skateboards. She couldn't get the picture out of her head and she wondered if it stood for something important. If it did she couldn't make it come clear. Like that line of her favorite song, it had leaked out through one of her cracks. Life had leaked out the same way, and all she could remember of it was a muddle of lonely nights and sick dogs and scallop shells and half-drowned sailors. Nothing important sticking up from the muddle. No monument to accomplishment or romance. Hah! She'd never met the man who could do what men said they could. The most reasonable men she'd known were those shipwrecked sailors, and their eyes big and dark as if they'd seen into some terrible bottomland that had sheared away their pride and stupidity. Her mind began to whirl, trying to get a fix on life, to pin it down like a dead butterfly and know its patterns; and soon she realized that she was literally whirling. Slowly, but getting faster and faster. She hauled herself up and clung to the wheelhouse door and peered over the side. The lobster boat was spinning around and around on the lip of a bowl of black water several hundred yards across. A whirlpool. Moonlight struck a glaze down its slopes but didn't reach the bottom. Its roaring, heart-stopping power scared her, made her giddy and faint. But after a moment she banished fear. So this was death. It just opened up and swallowed you whole. All right. That was fine by her. She slumped against the wheelhouse and drank deeply of the cherry brandy, listening to the wind and the singing of her blood as she went down not giving a damn. It sure beat puking up life a gob at a time in some hospital room. She kept slurping away at the brandy, guzzling it, wanting to be as looped as possible when the time came. But the time didn't come, and before too long she noticed that the boat had stopped spinning. The wind had quieted and the sea was calm.



A breeze coiled about her neck, slithered down her breast and began curling around her legs, flipping the hem of her dress. "You bastard," she said suddenly, too drunk to move. The elemental swirled around her knees, belling the dress, and touched her between the legs. It tickled, and she swatted at it ineffectually, as if it were one of the dogs snooting at her. But a second later it prodded her there again, a little harder than before, rubbing back and forth, and she felt a quiver of arousal. It startled her so that she went rolling across the deck, somehow keeping her bottle upright. That quiver stuck with her, though, and for an instant a red craving dominated the broken mosaic of her thoughts. Cackling and scratching herself, she staggered to her feet and leaned on the rail. The elemental was about fifty yards off the port bow, shaping itself a waterspout, a moonstruck column of blackness, from the placid surface of the sea.

"Hey!" she shouted, wobbling along the rail. "You come on back here! I'll teach you a new trick!"

The waterspout grew higher, a glistening black serpent that *whooshed* and sucked the boat toward it; but it didn't bother Sally. A devilish joy was in her, and her mind crackled with lightnings of pure craziness. She thought she had figured out something. Maybe nobody had ever taken a real interest in the elemental, and maybe that was why it eventually lost interest in them. Wellsir! She had an interest in it. Damn thing couldn't be any more stupid than some of her Dobermans. Snooted like one, for sure. She'd teach it to roll over and beg and who knows what else. Fetch me that fish, she'd tell it. Blow me over to Hyanis and smash the liquor store window and bring me six bottles of brandy. She'd show it who was boss. And could be one day she'd sail into the harbor at Nantucket with the thing on a leash. 'Sconset Sally and her pet storm, Scourge of the Seven Seas.

The boat was beginning to tip and slew sideways in the pull of the waterspout, but Sally scarcely noticed. "Hey!" she shouted again, and chuckled. "Maybe we can work things out! Maybe we're meant for each other!" She tripped over a warp in the planking, and the arm holding the bottle flailed above her head. Moonlight seemed to stream down into the bottle, igniting the brandy so that it glowed like a magic elixir, a dark red ruby flashing from her hand. Her maniacal laugh went sky-high.

"You come on back here!" she screeched at the elemental, exulting in the wild frequencies of her life, at the thought of herself in league with this idiot god, and unmindful of her true circumstance, of the thundering around her and the tiny boat slipping toward the foaming base of the waterspout. "Come back here, damn it! We're two

of a kind! We're birds of a feather! I'll sing you to sleep each night!  
You'll serve me my supper! I'll be your old, cracked bride, and we'll  
have a hell of a honeymoon while it lasts!"





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